



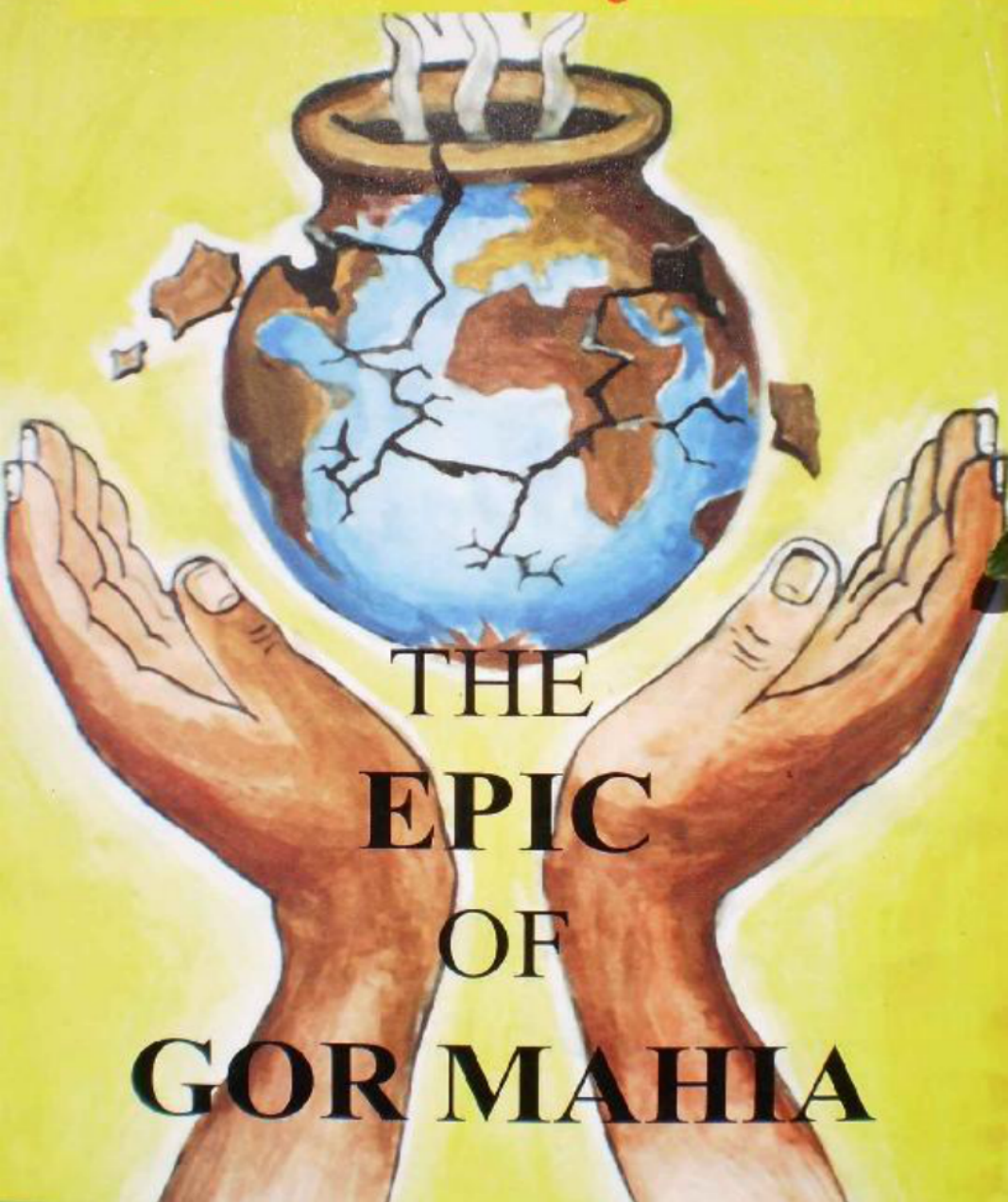
# **The Epic of Gor Mahia: The Luo Epic**

**Onyando, Adrian**

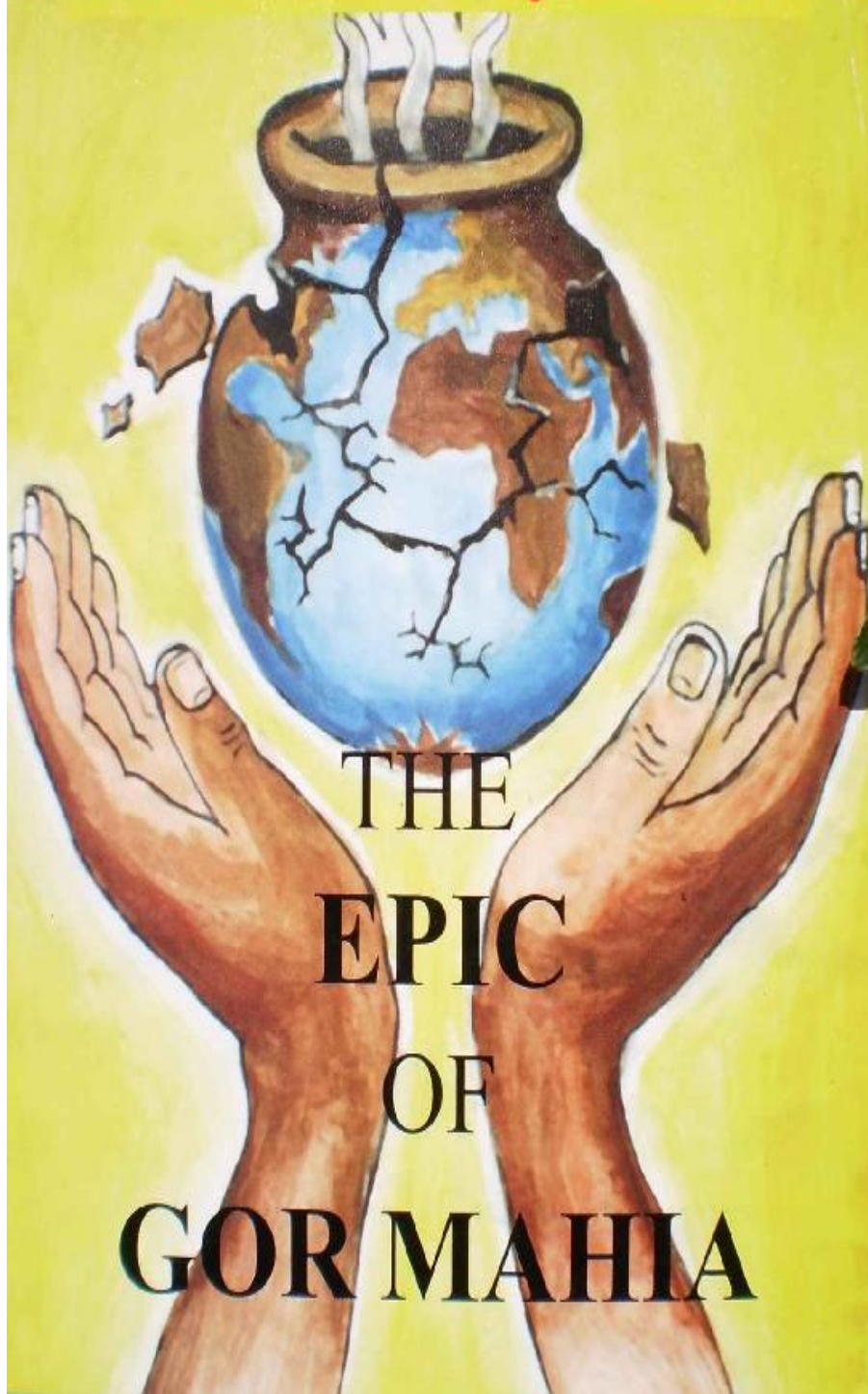
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**Adrian Onyando**



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**THE  
EPIC  
OF  
GOR MAHLA**

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## **Acknowledgement**

I acknowledge the role played in the development of my creativity by my late brother, Paul Pancras Oteyo 'Okumu'. He, almost single-handedly, nurtured and encouraged my literary talents until he died. May God rest his soul in peace.

## **Publisher's Note**

Although primarily drawn on a historical canvas, the poetic narrative presented here is fictional, borne out of the author's own eclectic research, oral and library, and imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons is purely coincidental. Real places and events mentioned in the book are depicted fictionally and are not intended to portray actual times or places.

## Introduction

Gor Mahia was a man of flesh and blood, like you and me, and his Kanyamwa chiefdom a reality, at least before it was transformed by the colonial occupation. Born Gor Okumu, son of Ogada and grandson to the famous Chief Ogalo, he was of the Kayambo section of the Kosewe clan of Kanyamwa, South Nyanza, Kenya. His mother was called Atoka, daughter of Jema of Kanyada. The date of Gor Mahia's birth is unrecorded, but sources indicate that he was born somewhere in the first half or in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Onyando 1995:48).

Gor's youth was fraught with trouble of great magnitude. To begin with, he was exiled to his maternal uncles' in Kanyada, due to the hostility of his stepbrothers. Then the Kanyamwa chiefdom was faced with a break-up. The Kanyamwa, who, together with their kinsmen, collectively referred to as *joka-Chwanya*, owned most of the land in South Nyanza were now threatened with stronger groups vying for the same land. It was a humiliating experience, given that the *joka-Chwanya* had regarded these groups as their *jodak*, meaning tenants. The *jodak* were not only content to claim territories; the last of them, the Kwabwai, tried to drive away the Kanyamwa from their beloved Ramba to the dry wildlife-infested country of Lambwe Valley (now mainly occupied by Ruma National Park) near the shores of Lake Victoria.

Gor had watched the machinations of the Kanyamwa enemies with keenness and devised ways of countering them. It is said that Gor was aided in this task by the magic, cunning, and even blessings he acquired from his paternal and maternal grandparents

who were both famous magicians in Luoland. He managed to take lead of his people and come face to face with the Kwabwai magician and leader, Otuoma, who he eventually outmanoeuvred. That was a significant landmark to a career of fighting, scheming against or tricking opponents and eventually laying them to waste. Gor was now the counsellor, the magician, the chief—in short, the *Ruoth* of Kanyamwa.

In 1903, the British, fearing the German advance from the nearby Tanganyika (now the Republic of Tanzania), landed at Sori in Karungu and flew the Union Jack there. They had passed through Gor Mahia's Kanyamwa chiefdom on their way there. The reaction to this intrusion was mixed but swift: the Karungu led by their war leader, Ougo, did not see reason as to why a *bogno*, that is, a baby-like creature, should approach them with 'cooking sticks' (guns) only. It was an insult to their warrior pride and a threat to their nationalist integrity. They fought bravely, using logs as shields and also as floaters on the Lake Victoria whose waters they had mistakenly thought would quench the gunfire. They only surrendered after quite a few of their warriors had been slain. This was the beginning of the British domination of the Southern Nyanza Luo and Kisii tribesmen.

As the British were looking for powerful leaders who could relate with them in their colonial rule, their choice of Gor as the chief of the region they renamed District of South Kavirondo was not surprising. He commanded great respect among the people as well as being co-operative with the British, two qualities which were difficult to find in a colonial chief. He was soon promoted to the position of a

paramount chief which made him busy with political and legal affairs and widely travelled in the British colony of Kenya, especially the western part of it.

In his old age, Gor relied heavily on his eldest and favourite son, Oswago, for the administration of the district. The contemporary District Commissioner wrote of Gor in 1908, 'Gori (sic) is now old but formerly had great power over the Jalu...' and again in March, 1911, 'Gor has great power in his own location and uses it sensibly. As a paramount chief, however, he is rather a failure and has not the energy necessary for the post' (Hemsted 1908, 1911: 116). The Kanyamwa people talk of Oswago as being their chief for two years although the colonial records show nothing of the sort. It is possible that Gor relinquished his powers to Oswago so that he appeared to be the chief in the eyes of his people as Gor hoped and expected that the colonial administration would bless his choice. However any such hopes were smashed to smithereens: Oswago died in May 1916, in a gun-shooting incident. In November of the same year, Gor was retired and succeeded by his very young son, Ogutu Raruoch, who had been taken out of school in Kisii.

When Gor died on May 9, 1920, the Luo people mourned heavily, wondering whether there would again be such a hero. The colonialists were likewise grief-stricken and frustrated for no one could satisfactorily fill the vacuum left by Gor; consequently a line of complaints and insults run through their reports on all of Gor's successors.

### **And now...**

Gor's memory is still fresh among the Kanyamwa



people and in Luoland as a whole where he has become something of a cult among the spirit mediums like Ajuoga. More significantly, Gor has at various times become the symbol of the Luo 'nation' within the republic of the Kenya. Consequently, in 1969, when the Luo's political fortunes were on the wane, they formed a football team and named it Gor Mahia Football Club. The myth of a heroic past represented by Gor became the only means of the community's political and social assertion in a state where they felt increasingly marginalised and oppressed. However, the fortunes of the football club, though unceasingly a source of Luo pride, has become larger as the team became international and representative of Kenya with its myriad ethnicities.

The last person who saw Gor was none other than his son, Nyamunga. In 1991, I travelled to Kanyamwa and interviewed him on his famous father. He pointed at a photograph on the wall of his sitting room. It was Gor, clad in traditional royal attire of leopard skin dress, monkey skin headgear and flywhisk. A dog stood next to him while *askaris* (guards) lurked behind in *kanzus* (flowing gowns) and caps. Nyamunga then remarked, 'He was the white man's chief who never put on his master's uniform.'

Nyamunga also remembered his father telling him, 'Nyamunga, you will live long to spread my story to the whole world.' Unfortunately for me, Nyamunga was too old to manage a few sentences without strain. Nor did he have his memory intact. It was not surprising for a man born in 1902.

Gor's descendants are now collectively referred to as Joka-Gor. In remembrance of their great progenitor, the Joka-Gor celebrate annually at his

shrine on Sigama Hill near Ndhiwa town in Kanyamwa. It is a fitting tribute to one who once said, 'Life is a relay game...Play at my funeral. Enact my life.' My hope is that as they undergo the rituals of remembrance, they uphold the wonder-maker's words and keep it for the coming generations.

### **...And Finally, My Word**

This is an epic of the word: the word as the raw material of all time, the word as life, the word as regeneration, the word as medicine, the word as prophecy. It couldn't have come to me at a better time than this, when we are facing decadence of the worst type, decadence masquerading as heroism, decadence standing as surrogate for morality and culture. Let us now, with Adegga Ny'Olando, straighten the mat of culture, so that there are no creases to harbour the fleas, no folds to hide the snakes. When you limp from a jigger infection or sag under poison, don't say you got it from sitting on the sacred mat. Declare where you got it. For we are weary of the false prophets of this world twisting the word, promoting counterfeit words and then unabashedly declaring 'this is how we have been, how we have done it.' They are referring to the scum at the bottom of the cultural pot, the dirt that was left as the clean water was depleted.

This word, I must speak. Back in the early 1980s, an unknown philosopher, Ong'ore Amuomo, an elder then in his 80s, told me, ' *Wach e kodhi mikano* .' He meant that the word is the seed we store for the coming seasons. He also told me that the season will one time be right and the seed will germinate. There are bad times as well as good times, the bad as well as

the good. And he had a story to prove it. His clan in Kochia, had almost been disseminated by a plague of smallpox. The spirits causing the plague would come at night and make weird noises, insult the people and generally rule the land. Soon after, somebody would go down with the plague. Until one day, the plague took away one hero—before he died he said, ‘Death cannot go on. We must live!’ He had been secluded and so he had to shout the message to be heard by his far-away interlocutors. Then he instantly turned into a spirit. That night of his bodily death and spiritual resurrection, there was no mourning; something terrible was going on. The spirit of the hero was fighting the evil spirits of the plague. There were screams, thunderclaps, blows and war songs. The hero was the last one to die from the plague. When someone fights an evil like a plague, then he is truly good. And it was this hero who told Amuomo the word, who gave him the seed and this is the seed I am planting in this book, *The Epic of Gor Mahia* .

The poetic narrative presented here is my own imaginative version, borne out of my own eclectic research, oral and library, and personal experiences. But it is primarily drawn on a historical canvas.—  
Adrian Onyando, 2015

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# SEASON ONE

*The word is the seed we store  
For planting in the coming seasons.*  
—Ong'ore Amuomo, Kochia

## To Spirit with Word

Rattling, I recite the names of our heroes.  
They died for us: we are yet to suffer for them.  
They suffered for us: we are yet to work for them.  
They worked for us: we are yet to praise their deeds.  
They talked to us: we are yet to learn from their words.

The wind blew away Gor Mahia's spirit,  
The earth swallowed his body,  
And people mourned his death.  
But the One-who-goes-and-returns is ever born anew  
In the memories and mouths of those he possesses.

Master of the Wind, Master of the Earth, Chief of the People:  
Behold his spirit is coming riding on the Wind.  
The Spirit belongs to Gor; the Whirlwind belongs to Gor.  
I, Adeg a ny'Olando, daughter of the land, welcome our hero  
With the rattling of the gourds and sighs of pleasure.  
He who traverses all the seas and land has arrived  
And settled on the daughter of the land at dawn.  
His spirit overwhelms me; his breath enchants me.

What shall I do to this Spirit who wandered with me  
And returned me home after six good years?  
I know—yes I know—that it is no longer safe  
For a woman to be accompanied by a man  
Or to roam the land alone.  
But lonely was I in the wilderness,  
Like the ancient Awando on the plains,  
Till Gor Mahia swooped on me like an eagle  
And protected me from fangs of snakes, jaws of beasts,  
Hands of mad men and tongues of witches.

I, Adeg a ny'Olando remember the wilderness days;  
I remember Gor who protected me.  
We spirit mediums are not like the riff-raffs

Who forget their saviours with time.  
I, Adega, went and returned:  
I went away a despised girl  
But returned a healer and prophet.

To him who protects an erratic girl,  
To him who gave me the healing powers,  
I sing and sing and sing.  
I shall sing to Gor Mahia,  
I shall rattle the gourd for Gor:  
The Mysterious Wonder Worker,  
The One-who-goes-and-returns,  
The one-who-takes-and-returns,  
The one who possessed and gave me the word.

## Birth and Death

The word originated from the ancestors:  
They said that the land would never run short of heroes,  
That whenever the enemies threatened it,  
They would despatch a hero to protect it.  
The word came from Chwanya Ragwar, the Fork,  
Passed through Onyango Rabala, the Rebel,  
Through Obunga Osewe and Ologi, the great brothers,  
And reached Ogalo Ng'injo, the Crumbs.

Ogalo son of Obunga Osewe knew the word;  
This nephew to the Kamreri was so wise he kept the word.  
Even as he lay in his bed weakened by old age,  
Ogalo knew the word had made him a hero:  
The Great Chief who had led not only the Kanyamwa  
But also everybody on this side of the Lake  
First named Ramba next Milambo then the South.

People say, and with learned truth:  
'Ramba, the Interior of Lake Lolwe, belongs to Ogalo.'  
Ogalo Ng'injo the Crumbs: he had gathered all the lost people  
Then reduced to crumbs by the onslaught of the Maasai,  
By the outbreak of epidemics and internal strife.  
Ogalo Ohinga, the Wall: he had built walls  
Around the villages which the enemies were wont to attack.  
The Karachuonyo had nestled under his wings;  
The Kanyada and Kochia enjoyed his warmth;  
The Kwabwai and Kanyadoto were so grateful  
They vowed to be one with him forever.

And the Bobassi and Bamachogi Kisiis  
Promised never to forget him  
For the sanctuary he gave them saved a whole generation.  
The interior indeed belongs to Ogalo Ng'injo the Chief.

Ogalo kept awake all night thinking of the ancient word  
That the land would never run short of heroes.  
And when it dawned, he wanted to rise up  
But all his body stuck to the bed:  
All his efforts to rise up were futile.  
Then he breathed in deeply, turned his head around  
And felt in his nose  
The fresh breeze from the Lake Lolwe to the north,  
The cold wind from the Highlands to the south and east  
And the warm draughts from the plains to the west.

Also in the air, sure as sunrise, was the smell of his death.  
The assistants helped him out of his bed.

In his Gamba Hill home, Ogalo decided he must see the land,  
And the people and his son Ogada  
And, yes, Ogada's wives at Sinyo.  
From the peak of the hill, Ogalo viewed the beautiful land:  
The sun peeped above the Highlands,  
The Lake glittered in the sunrise  
And the clouds perched coolly on hills and in valleys.  
But when the sun struck Ogalo, he felt like he was melting  
And everything under his glare was melting too.

He heard the people cry,  
'Father, what are we without you?  
What are the crumbs without a skilful hand  
To mould them into one?'

Ogalo gathered himself, looked at the 'crumbs'.  
'Are they all going to break up without me?' he wondered.  
To his messenger whose heels hardly touched the ground,  
He said, 'Go and say this to Ogada, my son, and his wives:  
I'm coming to see them tomorrow.'

There at Sinyo, Ogada prepared for the visit of his father.  
Beer was brewed, water for mixing with it boiled;  
Bulls were slaughtered, bulls big like buffaloes,  
Fish was roasted and pots of *kuon* made.

In those days people celebrated when there was life;  
In those days people were in love with life.

When day broke, Ogalo was already at Sinyo.  
Where the chief was, there the people converged,  
So all the people from Wamo, Kologi and Kayambo clans  
Came to enjoy the feast with their Chief.  
So too those who lived with the Kanyamwa  
Like the Kwabwai, Kano and Karachuonyo.  
So too those who had moved away like the Kisii.  
It was the time of peace in the entire Ramba.  
The roads were clean, the sky clear and the Lake calm.  
The wind took the sound of humanity far and wide  
As more people trooped to Sinyo  
To feast with the Chief of the Interior.

Ogalo Ng'injo summoned Ogada's wives and children.  
One by one, he greeted them,  
Called the women by their names  
And, where memory allowed him, by territories of their birth.

A woman came forward carrying her newly born baby  
And Ogalo's face lit up in recognition:  
'Ae Atoka nyar Jema, daughter of the Kanyada,  
So you've delivered a baby at last!'  
Turning to the people he said,  
'How much my daughter-in-law has suffered!  
She who doesn't have a baby is dead  
Even before her spirit goes to the West.'  
He asked for the name of the baby;  
It hadn't been named.  
So the elder told the crowd,  
'This only begotten son of his mother,  
I name him Gor, Gor Okumu.'

He addressed the baby thus,  
'O Gor Okumu, the Mysterious One,  
When the crumbs fall apart  
And the wholeness of the land is threatened  
It is you who will protect this land.'

The baby looked at the old man steadily  
And their blazing eyes met.  
The two resembled like identical twins,

Only one was old and dying and the other  
Newly born and his life blooming.  
'He who has daughters-in-law will never die,' said Ogalo.  
'For he is like the fruit of a species produced by many trees.  
And when the trees are cut down  
The seeds will germinate to produce the same tree and fruit.'

Ogalo stretched his arms, took the baby from his mother,  
Lay down on his back and passed the baby over his body:  
Over the toes, past the belly and chest and over the head.  
He rose up, took soil and put it in the baby's hands saying,  
'This land, all this land,  
I give it to you Gor Okumu  
For the land must have one leader,  
And the leader must be one with the land.'

There at Sinyo, the people looked on with awe.  
Fears for the future were allayed;  
Fears for the present were abundant.  
What if the Chief died now, as he appeared he would?  
Would the baby-sit, crawl, stand up, totter and run all at a go  
And then lead the crumbs his grandfather had gathered?  
True, leadership had virtually passed on to Ogada  
But to hold the varied people together  
One needed Ogalo's power and strength.

There at Sinyo, Ogalo glared at the people  
And he saw them melt before him.  
With the power that unified the people, everybody,  
And kept the enemies, those evil ones, at bay,  
He cried, 'Where I'm heading, you too shall reach.  
Will all be well when I am gone?  
Yes, yes, yes, but only if  
You pass on your goodness  
To those who will bear you anew.  
Life is a relay game.  
Let nobody die with knowledge.  
Let nobody die with goodness.  
Let the word pass on to sons and daughters:  
It is the seed that germinates beyond our days.  
Then we shall be born anew.  
The land will be lush and green  
And fresh with new life.'



That evening, the chief was back at his Gamba home.  
For the elder does not spend the night outside his home.  
That evening, the sun melted, rivers boiled  
And the earth shook, just enough to change life.  
The sky was heavy, starless, dark.  
Then the skies came down, soaked the earth  
And rushed down the Lake in watery form.  
The news of Ogalo's death came.  
People's faces darkened. They cried,  
'Father who held us together, where are you?'  
On everybody's lips were cries and questions  
Which neatly transformed into a dirge.

Walalala laa! Walalala laa!  
I, Adega ny'Olando, too shall sing to the ancestors  
Who founded this land by piercing its soil with spears.  
Their spirits were with Gor and Gor's spirit is with me.  
I shall remember those sages swallowed by the earth.  
I shall broadcast their words in all the horns of the earth.

Oh how large is the belly of the earth!  
Oh how large is the mouth of Death!  
Under the soil are bodies of great men.  
If you doubt that you will die,  
Then tell me where Ogalo's bones are.

'Where are the heroes of yesteryears?'  
So people mourned Ogalo the Crumbs.  
Their eyes were drained of tears,  
Mouths drained of saliva  
And throats drained of moisture.  
The dirge was weakly sang at dawn:

*Father who held us together, where are you?*  
*Son of Obunga Osewe, grandson to Maroka*  
*Would you rather be with the ancestors—*  
*They of wit and magic—*  
*Than be with us mortals?*  
*What have we done son of Osewe*  
*That you should leave us so?*  
*Ogalo, pass our greetings to the ancestors.*  
*Tell them we're soon coming,*  
*For we too shall follow you.*

# Rise of the Ratego Spirit

Ogada sat for four days without moving,  
Being born anew as man and Chief.  
When the skies cleared and the mourners dispersed  
He summoned a meeting and pointed out to the elders,  
'Look! The Lake is swelling and the rivers are overflowing.  
The Kuja is sweeping away its victims,  
And the Awach is washing away the whole land.  
To those who remain behind:  
We must unite and build anew.'

But the floods dazzling his eyes tortured him  
And he was overwhelmed by the vastness of the Lake  
And he cried for his father's blazing eyes  
That would dry up the rivers in one glance.  
And he cried for Ogalo's magic and wit  
That would hold the earth together.

The war generals led by Osumba Ochieng' Ratego  
Readily came to his help.  
For building the land anew is like starting war.  
The assembly listened as Ochieng' Ratego spoke;  
He was muscular in his neck and chest and when he boomed,  
He was like a keen man pointing out the presence of snakes  
Among his unwary fellows. He said,  
'The crumbs are too many for one man!  
Here we are the owners of the land,  
Outnumbered, outgrown and outshone by foreigners  
Some of whom have no manners,  
Or speak in tongues even the spirits cannot translate.  
Let every wild-cat to his lair go!'

Then there was a roar like that of thunder  
As the snakes in the assembly were unleashed.  
Elder against elder; warrior against warrior,  
The pot of unity was broken  
And could not contain the water for life.  
Many were the potsherds formed  
And each could only carry fire for destruction.  
Ogada ended the meeting but not the uproar.

The Kanyada and Karachuonyo said they were leaving;  
The Kano said they would go away without turning back.  
The Kanyadoto said they would go away without saying bye.

The Kochia said they were the unhappy tenants  
And the Kwabwai, led by Otuoma wuo' Matoro, said,  
'We shall not be like the guests that outlive their welcome.'

Other crumbs were packing and leaving.  
So Ogada summoned another meeting.  
It was under a sacred fig tree;  
He looked up over the gathering and saw stretches of plains,  
Series of valleys and mountains,  
And the vastness of the Lake and rivers.

Birds blared, big game grazed,  
Hyaenas hunted, laughed or fought  
Or waited for crumbs to fall off others' mouths.  
The gathering teemed with gesticulating and swearing people.  
The scenario was so scaring,  
So scaring Ogada firmly clang to his staff  
And then with a trembling voice said,  
'Let all the crumbs unite and the benefits shall be many.'

But Ochieng' Ratego retched, gesticulated.  
And when his voice boomed across the escarpment,  
Everyone was frighteningly packing.  
'Every wild-cat must to his lair go!' he ordered.  
'Those who remain here shall only be our slaves:  
Cultivators in the fields,  
Hunters in the wilds  
And warriors at the fronts.'  
Then Ogada brought down the staff on Ratego.  
Until he was torn to shreds, as it were.  
But the next day Ratego rose up,  
Ordered the Kanyada to cultivate for him the bush  
The Kochia to hunt for him fierce beasts  
And the Kano to raid for him the Maasai.  
The Kanyada were never seen again;  
The Kochia homesteads were vacant  
And the Kano had reached their plains  
Though the Nyando was raging already.  
All the crumbs founded territories far away, saying,  
'That world behind us has come to an end!'

The leader who fears his people, what is he?  
The leader who fears his land, what is he?  
A coward fears even himself;

He flees from the sound of his footsteps  
And recoils at the sight of his shadow.  
People of our land, I beg you not to misunderstand me.  
Ogada was not a coward but he let Ratego roam the land  
Like an emissary with an urgent message.  
Ratego, a mere youth drunken with strength,  
Who only knew how to wield the spear talked.  
He told the elders, 'The Chief cannot rule without us,  
But we can rule without the chief.  
Let there be a council of all but the crumbs!'  
So the Kanyamwa elders and people met on Sigama Hill  
Under the sacred fig tree they listened, still as the hill.  
'We are not the crumbs who can be dropped off the body  
Like excrement and human waste,  
We are the founders of this land!  
We are the owners of this land!  
We are the rulers of this land!  
The crumbs that have claimed territories of their own  
Let them be brought back whether they agree or not.  
Who lets his domestic animals to stay in the wilds?  
We are the owners of this land!  
All the land in Ramba belongs to the Kanyamwa!'  
When Ratego talked, his voice was like a roll of drum.  
And he was like an expert dancer to the roll of drum.  
The whole Kanyamwa joined in the dance of their *Osumba*;  
Ratego boasted that all ears were inclined in his direction.  
The Kwabwai under the leadership of the young Otuoma  
Seceded from the Kanyamwa  
But were badly beaten and brought back to the fold.  
And Otuoma fled to his maternal uncles' in Kabuoch  
Together with his wife who was a daughter of Chief Ogada.

Bolstered by the victory Ratego rose up,  
Looked around the earth  
And saw that all was his.  
He roared on top of the escarpment,  
'If our army flows downwards,  
We shall sweep all the earth,  
In our vengeful path,  
We shall sweep all the rubble  
Broken from us.  
All the earth is ours!'

'What?' asked Ogada.

‘Now that you have chased them away...’

‘Now that I have chased them away,’ said Ratego,  
‘I want to bring them back injured and broken.  
From where the sun rises to where it sets—  
All must bear the name of Kanyamwa.’

‘Such a task needs great sacrifice;  
It needs great preparation,’ said Ogada.

Roared Ratego, ‘Skip the preparation  
And let’s go!’

But slightly after midnight,  
The chief was in his divination attire  
And the warriors in their garbs.  
A bonfire was made; it became a shrine.  
The flames leaped up to the sky  
Kissed the stars and came back  
To dance the dance of death on earth.  
The warriors danced for war,  
Dared the fire to burn them,  
But the chief quieted them;  
So still and silent was the earth that morning.

Ogada said, ‘We are going for war,  
But we must pass through the fire.’  
He looked at Ratego and said,  
‘Start! You are the war leader.’

A cock crowed, a hornbill hooted,  
But the war leader stared at the raging fire  
And he too raged like the fire  
And scowled at the diviner;  
You would fear he was spoiling  
To quench the fire and consume the diviner.

‘Old fashioned ways of war,  
Will not win us the war.  
My sandals are weak;  
They might melt in the fire.  
I, Ochieng Ratego, say: Let’s go!’

And Ratego’s army went to war

Without his saying,  
'I'm ready to die for the land,  
Even if it is in fire!'

People, let's sing:

*Ratego's army went to war  
Without sacrifice, without prayers.  
If you cannot say,  
'I'm ready to die for the land!'  
Then don't go outdoors;  
Return to your mother's hearth.  
Coward, if you cannot run through fire,  
Return to your mother's womb!*

Ratego tracked down the Kano and told them,  
'Wherever you go you will still be in our hand  
Even if you settle across the Lake  
You will still be in our land...'  
But the Kano said in unison,  
'Wherever we put up is our land!'

'Then, today you shall not sleep on land!  
Perhaps like birds, you shall grow wings  
And sleep in the sky or on trees  
Or like fish seek refuge in the waters of the Nyando  
Or like moles or antbears stay underground.  
But never shall you sleep on land.  
On this earth, only the Kanyamwa have land!  
I, Ochieng' Ratego, have spoken.'

Where the Kano had settled was vast and peaceful.  
The lions slept in one wilderness with the buffaloes;  
The birds were on one tree with snakes.  
But the men of one kind did not want to co-exist.

Ratego's army broke into war song:

*War is our game!  
We the descendants of Chwanya and Jok  
Do not waste time with palaver.  
War is in our hearts!*

'Why not keep it in your hearts?' said the Kano.

'What is in your hearts is a disease:  
We do not want it to consume us.'

Ratego performed his war dance saying:  
'Talking is not our game;  
We shall consume you like fire!'  
And he had refused to go through the bonfire!

War is bad our people  
Shields against shields, spear against spear  
Men grunted, women screamed to the skies  
And children cried and scampered in horror.  
War chants filled the land as spears pierced hearts  
And women and children were offered to Death.  
The earth shook  
And the eye of the sun  
Turned red, red like blood.

I Adega ny'Olando ask,  
Why do men want us to suffer so?  
Oh, war is not our game;  
War is our grief!  
We who never go to war  
But retreat to the frontiers  
Of our hearts, wounded and bleeding,  
Grief is in our hearts!

When Ratego got into war,  
The sun would refuse to set and the night refuse to come.  
The war would just go on and on  
As if the earth would be motionless, holding its breath.  
But on that day, the sun set when the war had ended  
And when the night came, the Kanyamwa were fleeing  
Across the rivers, the plains and bushes.  
Through the tableland and swamps,  
The Kanyamwa warriors were fleeing.

Ochieng' Ratego rebuked the warriors:  
'Why fear the crumbs that fell off our hands?  
This generation of warriors shall spoil our great name!'  
A plague of shame devastated his spirit, but he fought it.

Osumba Ochieng' Ratego:  
The one for whom the sun refuses to set

And the night refuses to fall...  
He didn't want to return home with defeat.  
For him, an expedition was to end in victory  
Or it should not end at all,  
So on the way back, he directed his army to Kagan, saying:  
'These people's blood is as scanty as that of an insect:  
Let us swoop upon them at dawn  
And the eye of the sun will find them no more.'

Aha, the Kagan never sleep!  
The sun is always early;  
But the Kagan are always earlier than the sun.  
At dawn, they were wide awake  
For they knew that there were formidable enemies  
Of their new-found territory.  
They saw Ratego's army advancing and fled, as it were,  
Leaving everything behind, even the cherished cattle.  
Ae what a people!  
Ratego's mouth salivated for the livestock  
And the victory about to be won by default.  
He ordered the warriors to pursue the fleeing Kagan  
And the Kanyamwa warriors ran so fast;  
They saw the victory which had eluded them  
And they were determined to clinch it.  
The Kagan ran and ran and ran  
Looking back at the Kanyamwa and laughing.  
What a loud laughter it was!  
The cause of their laughter was at one time puzzling  
And at another frustrating and doubt-causing.

'None of the Kagan fools  
Will be spared, none!' vowed Ratego.  
But soon, our warriors were foaming and staggering  
(Ai! What was happening?)  
And one by one they were collapsing and dying.

The Kagan had thrown *okuro* thorns in their wake,  
Thorns that had been cooked in *kwiri* poison;  
From the witches' snakes, the *kwiri* had come.  
Piercing through the worn-out sandals of our warriors,  
The thorns injected death in their flesh and blood.  
Ae, the braves died!  
On those who survived, the Kagan sharply turned  
And released their poisoned arrows.



My kinsmen, our warriors were killed.  
And the flight changed direction:  
Now, our warriors were fleeing from the Kagan braves.  
And our army was utterly, utterly destroyed.

When Ratego returned to Kanyamwa  
Ogada asked him for the warriors.  
'Oh! War is in their hearts!' replied Ratego.  
'Gone wild with the desire to reclaim their land,  
They are scattering the wayward crumbs  
Like cowrie shells in the hands of diviners.  
War is the warriors' game  
And I, the Osumba war leader,  
Can't I have even a short rest?'

But soon the real word spread:  
That the Kanyamwa army was no more,  
That vultures were so satiated their stomachs were bursting  
With the abundant flesh of the slain Kanyamwa warriors.  
And soon, the real sight was saddening:  
Beasts of prey were fat with carrion,  
Birds of prey sailed with carrion in their beaks,  
Cannibals arrived in the land,  
To feast on the famous cadaver  
Of the slain braves of Ramba.

Everybody on this side of the Lake celebrated;  
They made bonfires and roasted meat and cereals in them.  
Yet it was the Kanyamwa that had made them be.  
In this world, kinspeople, there is no sympathy,  
Only concealed derisive laughter and cheers  
That explode at critical moments.

Grief fell on Milambo like rain clouds  
And covered every face, every homestead.  
Then Chief Ogada said,  
'Stop it our people! Stop it!  
We the descendants of Nyamwa—  
The daughter of foreigners who lived well—  
Were not born with muscles only.  
We were born with magic and wit too.  
Kanyamwa will never end!  
If the muscles are no more,  
We shall use magic and wit.'

It was in the morning;  
The morning star blinked in wakefulness  
And the chief saw it was the harbinger  
Of a sun reluctant to rise.  
He turned in the direction of the sun and prayed,  
'The magic of Jok:  
You, our elder who welcomed strangers  
And made them relatives and allies;  
The magic of Chwanya Ragwar the Fork:  
You who stood by your family  
Even during a calamity as serious as patricide;  
The magic of Onyango Rabala the Rebel:  
You who single-handedly rescued your father  
From the captivity of opium-smoking invaders.  
The magic of Ologi and Obunga Osewe:  
You, loving brothers who crossed the Lake  
And founded Ramba by piercing the soil with spears;  
The magic of Ogalo Ng'injo the Crumbs:  
Our father who gathered the lost people.  
Come! Come! Come!  
Come from the Lake!  
Come from the Sun!'

Then our medicine-men joined the Chief in prayer  
And invoked the wisdom and magic of the ancestors.  
They invoked the wisdom of the great ancestress, Nyamwa—  
She who came from a different tribe but established a family  
So prosperous it was the envy of every Luo clan.  
They invoked the wisdom of Teful—  
He who fled from destruction to save his people;  
The wisdom of Ramogi the War leader  
Whose spear tore across the sky like the Nyametho comet  
And scared off the enemies, even before he reached them  
And when the spear landed on Got Ramogi Hill,  
It repelled the enemies and they fled.

The elders went to sacrifice at Ogalo Ng'injo's tomb at Gamba  
And there they solemnly prayed:  
'*Jaduong', tinende wakeloni diel* ,  
Elder, today we have brought you a goat.  
Wisdom is found in magic!  
Yaye Ogalo Ng'injo, where is thy magic?'

Then the sun rose from inside the Womb of the Lake  
And its rays fell on the child Gor;  
A tornado formed and dug into the Womb of the Lake  
And made a pillar of water between the earth and sky.  
Ai, magic belongs to Gor!  
The tornado belongs to Gor  
And I too, the diviner, belong to Gor.

## **The Contest of Two Babies**

Omoro of Kanyadoto came to Chief Ogada feigning respect.  
'Son of Ogalo,' he said, 'for long,  
Our people have lived together,  
But now is not the time to live together any more  
For we shall soon begin to contempt each other.  
Let my people also own land.'

'Which land, fellow elder?' asked Ogada quietly.

'This land!' replied Omoro loudly.

'This land we occupy is ours!'

'Fellow elder,' said Ogada, 'let's not quarrel.  
The land you occupy is right at the heart of Kanyamwa.  
Let it not be said by the ancestors and the future generation  
That Ogada allowed tenants to grab the ancestral shrines.  
However, if you can go far and occupy land elsewhere,  
I shall not pursue you.  
The land is vast  
Go and occupy it like the others have done.'

But Omoro creased his face, tensed his muscles  
And stamped his feet on the ground vowing,  
'I shall not move!'

The Kanyamwa land was fertile,  
The Luos call it 'the female soil'.

'This land we occupy is ours!' cried Omoro.

'Fellow elder,' said Ogada coolly, 'let us not fight.  
Let the ancestors decide for us who owns this land you want.  
Bring your child Onduru  
And I too shall bring my child, Okumu.

We shall tie ropes around them  
And whichever child breaks the rope  
Shall win the land for his people.'

Omore happily consented to the contest and went away.  
Truly, he thought, anticipating victory,  
My four-year-old son is exceptionally strong  
And can even break a rope made of metal!  
Truly, he thought again, that child Gor,  
Even though he is Onduru's age-mate,  
Is too weak to even break a rope made of cobwebs!

Two ropes were made and their strength tested  
By having ten strong men at both ends pull at them.  
The ropes were long like rivers—  
The stalwarts at one end  
Could hardly see those at the other end.  
Then they were tied to the *kang'o* tree.

People of our homestead, the *kang'o* tree is hard  
And well rooted in the earth.  
It does shake in the wind, but does it break?  
Does it break with the blows of axes  
Or yield to the persistent million mouths of termites?  
People of our homestead, the *kang'o* tree is strong.

Drums beat, whistles and horns blew  
And praises showered on the contestants.  
Monkeys shrieked in trees;  
The *omoro* Rhone antelope bellowed.  
Spectators moved to the arena.  
'The Contest of Two Babies' was underway.

Omore's child was a giant,  
But Ogada's child was only clever.  
Oh Gor was clever!  
The rope was tied to Omore's son's waist  
And the referee shouted 'Pu-u-u-ll!'  
Onduru ran and ran and ran  
And when the rope finally tautened, he failed to break it.  
He collapsed and was carried away to drink potfuls of milk  
And to eat all the grains from his father's granaries.  
Oh, what a shame to eat after defeat!

But when Gor was brought to the arena,  
The Black One turned wild.  
Even when they were tying the rope to his waist  
They could hardly hold him down.  
The child had the strength of a hundred well-fed bulls.  
When the referee said, 'P-U-U-U-LL!' Gor dashed forward  
Like lightning, like the flash flood!  
The eyes of the spectators could hardly trace him  
As he licked the length of the rope in an instant.  
Before the eye could adjust to the speed  
The rope sounded 'NDING'! and was broken.  
And the *kang'o* tree also broke, ae Gor!  
A song broke out,

*Gor is the tornado that breaks the kang'o tree,  
Ae the Tornado!*  
*Gor is the Earth Shaker that turns the earth,  
Ae the Shaker!*  
*With the roots of the kang'o tree,  
He uprooted the plants,  
Ae the Uprooter!*

Omoro gathered his belongings and his people  
And migrated far away to Nduru.  
There they put up shelters and claimed it for their own.

Ogada said: 'Let them exist too.'  
But Ochieng' Ratego's stomach rumbled and he burst out,  
'War is in my stomach!'

'Let it remain in your stomach!' people replied.  
'For us, the child Gor has won a war.'

It was as though Gor had won,  
Not against an enemy, but against Ratego.  
Jealousy ate Ratego's stomach  
Like hunger eats up our intestines in famine.  
Yet, if it were not for the wisdom of our forefather  
This land would have gone.  
If it were not for the wisdom of Gor  
We would be having no land.  
For there are dangerous vultures  
Waiting for you to make the kill  
And then when you settle to eat it,

They grab and make away with it  
Leaving you exhausted, hungry and poor.

## He Sees Even As He Sleeps

Young as he was, Gor went on to perform feats  
At the playground, he blinked both eyes,  
Confusing his playmates and the whole land.  
He danced with his fingers instead of his legs;  
He ran around and disappeared in the thin air.  
When Gor heaved a sigh, the trees and grasses would shake  
And dust would rise by force of his breath,  
Forming the tornado, the stamp of his presence.  
Gor would wake up early in the morning,  
Lie down at midnight and refuse to sleep;  
Even if he slept, his eyes would be wide open.  
That is why he was given new names.  
One was *Gor ng'at ma tho to neno*:  
The one who sees even as he sleeps or is dead;  
That is why he was called Gor Mahia:  
The mysterious, miraculous and cunning one.  
That is why his playmates,  
Like Afuata wuon Ongoro of Kabuoch, a chief elect,  
Nyakiti k'Ogutu and Ogalo Nyaguga both of Mount Huma  
Feared, loved, hated and sometimes were confused about him.  
That is why Oyamo Odidi, the sorcerer of Ruma trembled.  
That is why Gor's step-brothers grumbled:  
The vultures of power waiting for Chief Ogada to die cried,  
'This child will snatch fame from us!'  
They were so jealous they said,  
'His deeds will mislead people to think he can lead us!'

As the wit and magic of the ancestors overwhelmed Gor,  
Ochieng' Ratego convulsed,  
Beat his head against the *Ohinga* wall saying,  
'No! No! No! No!'  
He went to Gor's step-brothers,  
Washed them with poisonous words  
And bade them think of evil schemes.  
'This child will muddle us!' he prophesied.

The step-brothers felt more threatened,  
Went to Ogada and asked him to name his successor.  
Ogada did not reply but took Gor for a walk.

Gor had only reached the age of herding goats and calves,  
But Ogada was so old he could hardly walk straight.  
He led the child along lonely paths,  
Stayed with him in the wilderness;  
Only in such times can you study your companion.

Ogada asked his son questions about life;  
He answered all of them correctly.  
He asked him what was most important;  
He said it was land, land, land.  
He asked him to name the least important thing  
And he said it was an excuse.  
'Whenever something is required of us,  
We fail to deliver it, citing, "Because..."  
This "Because..." is our curse.  
'Because, because, because"...'

Ogada laughed because the mimicry was funny.  
'How would curb the wild animal menace?'  
Gor knew the answer.  
'How would you treat livestock diseases  
And how would you cultivate various crops?'

And the grandson to Ogalo proved knowledgeable;  
To the surprise of his father, he knew everything.

Then came the big question, 'If you were a chief,  
And there was a crisis in the land,  
What would you do?'

'I would do as my ancestors have done,' said Gor,  
'That is, summon the elders and ask for their words.  
But for me father,  
The elders are not the white-haired men only.  
They can be the young expert hunters,  
The industrious herdsmen or clever fish-trappers,  
The clever women and prosperous farmers.  
Father, we must have leaders of the challenging present  
Alongside those of the glorious past and bright future.'

'What a leader!' said Ogada.  
'Who ever heard of women and youth,  
Sitting alongside the elders to decide for the land?'

'Father, we the Kanyamwa are named after a woman;  
We are so proud of our great ancestress  
We named our land after her.  
Should we now turn and say her lot cannot think?  
When Ologi and Obunga Osewe reached this land  
And pierced it with their spears saying, "Here we shall live!",  
They were only young men.  
Should we therefore say that the founders of this land  
Were not adequate to lead the land?'

Ogada was impressed by his son.  
He jokingly challenged him to a duel to assess his strength.  
Gor disappeared into the thin air  
And in his stead was a bull elephant,  
Presaged by a whirlwind,  
Threatening to destroy the land.  
Ogada fell backwards as the beast passed over him  
But did him no harm.  
When he rose up, he feared for his son,  
'Oh my son, fellow chief, where are you?'

Then the beast disappeared and in its stead was Gor,  
'Father, I was only joking with you.'  
Then the memory of breaking the rope and tree came to him  
And he became proud of his miraculous child.

When Ogada and his son returned home, there was an uproar.  
How could the Chief make a chief out of a child  
When there were so many eligible adults?  
Ogada said it was not age that counted but wisdom.  
Moreover, Ogalo the Crumbs had appointed Gor to the throne.

Ochieng' Ratego and Gor's step-brothers shook their spears,  
Drove them fast into the earth with their right hands saying,  
'If the child takes the staff upon your death,  
We shall kill him!'

Then Ogada considered the situation in his family,  
Saw that Gor had neither a blood brother  
Nor a military leader to back him at his age.  
'Let my eldest son Ong'ondo take it when I die, and...'  
Silently Ogada spoke, '...keep it for this child.'

Then the step-brothers were appeased



For they could tell Ong'ondo to sit down and he would do so  
Or to cry, or yelp or run and he would still do so.

## Serious Like An Epidemic

The chief became old but would not die  
Ong'ondo was also ageing fast without being the chief.  
Gor Mahia was growing fast—an athletic and tricky lad  
With the propensity to think independently,  
Counsel his elders and perform wonders for them.  
But his deeds riled Ratego and the step-brothers the more.  
They said, 'He is a quack!'  
And went about explaining that the land of Kanyamwa  
Had never produced a 'baby magician'—  
Not even the famous Ogalo Ng'injo had started this early.  
And they wanted to prove that Gor was nothing but a quack.  
The question in their lips was,  
Was Gor a serious magician or an impostor?

Gor was weeding in his mother's garden:  
The sorghum was tall; the pumpkins were promising.  
The cowpeas and beans yielded big seeds;  
The simsim and millet were the envy of many.  
Gor took good care of his mother's garden;  
So good was his tending  
That the weeds feared the soil in which Gor grew the crops.  
The garden in which Gor stayed from morning to evening  
Fed the whole of Ogada's family with vegetables and grains.

There were the jealous ones:  
They who do not want to see any good happen to the people;  
They who hate to work but love to eat and destroy;  
They who are the curse of the black man  
For they eliminate the good ones and remain as the lords.  
*Thu kiragi!* Let them be cursed!

These *ogolo* seeds were unhappy to see prosperity in Gor.  
Gor's hard work was an offence to them;  
It was a challenge to their laziness,  
So to the garden they herded the cattle they had rustled  
(Thieves they always are)  
And let them maraud the garden.

Gor asked the jealous ones,  
'My brothers why do you do this to me?'

‘What do we do to you,  
If not to relieve you of useless work?’

‘Why do you destroy my crops?’ asked Gor.

In reply, they sung a solo-and-chorus song to Gor,

*Where do the crops grow?*

*In the soil!*

*Which soil is this?*

*The Kanyamwa soil.*

*And who owns it?*

*Everybody!*

‘The greedy ones,’ they laughed,  
‘Would rather have the whole earth for their crops  
Than spare a patch for our animals.’  
And they brought more cattle to the garden.

Gor was in a rage:  
He was like a hundred bull buffaloes annoyed by hunters.  
He asked, ‘Is this how brothers should treat a brother?’  
They replied that there was no kinship between them and Gor.  
‘If kinship is no more,’ said Gor wielding an *odunga* stick,  
‘Then like beasts in the wild, we shall be to each other.’  
Gor brought down the *odunga* stick on the cattle and they fled  
Turning into buffaloes and other wild animals.  
The laughing herdsmen charged at Gor with their spears.  
But Gor, the fighter of multitudes, beat them  
One by one, two by two, till all they fled  
And he beat one young man so hard  
He instantly turned into a mentally deranged old man.  
The ‘young man’ went to his home and scared everybody.  
He said, ‘People of our homestead, don’t run away from me.  
It’s Gor k’Ogada who’s made me be like this.’

Gor’s step-brothers went around exclaiming,  
‘What a wizard!’  
And Ochieng’ Ratego said, ‘We must kill the wizard!  
He will one day finish us all!’

A gang was formed to hunt down Gor.  
The next morning, the sun peeped above the mountains,

Cast light on the sparkling dews,  
Revealing Gor on the Ruma plain and valley  
Where a young sorcerer, Oyamo Odidi, resided.

‘There he is! There he is!’ the band shouted.  
They charged towards Gor, their spears pointing at his heart,  
But it was not Gor they found on the plains;  
It was the *omoro* Rhone antelope, sparkling in splendour,  
That engaged them in a race across the plains—  
Ae! The *omoro* is too good to be killed;  
Its bellows keep the plain in awesome glory.  
The band thought they had finally caught up with the *omoro* ,  
But only an anthill came to be and they fell over it,  
Breaking their spears and bones.  
Yes, the jealous ones broke their spears and bones  
Because they wanted to finish Gor.

My kinspeople, Gor could not be defeated.  
He turned into the Master of the Plains,  
Aaye, the anthill is the King of the Plains!  
Gor stood over the exhausted, fallen heroes and said,  
‘Men of our land, what kind of game is this  
In which you lie in dust as if you have no beds?  
If you desire to be fowls that like to bathe in dust,  
Tell me so that I may give you beaks, claws and feathers.’  
But the gang was too ashamed to talk.  
Gor bade them return to their homes.

People realised that Gor was as serious as an epidemic.  
The nephew to the Kanyada was indispensable in the land.  
Grandson to Ogalo was mentionable in the talks of the people.  
Gor was as famous as his grandfather, Ogalo Ng’injo.  
It was remembered that Ogalo was as tricky and witty.  
So people began to think Ogalo was his father:  
And Gor k’Ogalo or Gor Mak’Ogalo became his new name.

When Ogada finally died, Ong’ondo took over  
But so old was the chief that he could do nothing alone.  
For support, he did not waver:  
He leaned on his staff, on his brothers and on Ratego.  
Gor’s step-brothers and Ochieng’ Ratego gleamed:  
They loved the chief so much for being so old and helpless.  
If they could, they would sustain him in that state forever,  
Neither making him stronger and younger

Nor weakening him or putting him nearer to death.  
They moved from their homes and camped at Ong'ondo's—  
Speaking, threatening, coaxing, judging, punishing ...  
On behalf of the chief.  
People complained about their haughtiness and cruelty  
But the chief told them, 'I'll send my dogs to silence you!'

Gor said the leaders had reached the heart of stupidity;  
People said Gor had spoken the truth.  
Then the fearful ones said, 'So he still has a voice  
After the father who supported him has gone?  
Let's kill him!  
This child will mess us up!'

They knew that Gor Mahia could not be faced directly  
So they employed sorcerers to finish him.  
The sorcerers told the schemers to wait  
Until the sleep of dawn overwhelms Gor.  
Gor slept without closing his eyes like a rabbit.  
The next day the sorcerers told the schemers to waylay Gor  
On his way to the garden.  
Gor did not turn up.  
The sorcerers advised the schemers to invite Gor  
Ostensibly to reconcile with him but actually to kill him.  
Gor sent only a representative.  
When all ways had been exhausted  
The sorcerers got together to kill Gor themselves.  
'This is a clever one,' they said.

## **Exile and The Ogres' Festival**

Atoka, Gor's mother, had watched with horror  
As Ratego and the half-brothers tried to kill her son.  
She talked to Gor in confidence,  
'The right thing to do my son,  
Is to go into exile; it is a short respite.  
These people are determined to finish you.  
Go to my father's home and have refuge there.  
You cannot fight a hundred witches,  
You're still young:  
The seat which they've denied you  
Is yours by ancestral appointment.  
The more they occupy it, the more they'll be cursed.'

Gor respected his mother,

So he considered her request.  
That night Gor left Kanyamwa and fled to his uncles',  
The monkeys shrieked in trees.  
There was a storm on the escarpment  
And the *omoro* antelope bellowed,  
To show it existed and belonged to Milambo.  
Gor walked on undaunted,  
Knowing that in the end,  
His destination would be his point of departure.

He reached Kanyada Kothidha at dawn;  
There he stayed with his grandfather, Jema the Magician.

Back in Kanyamwa, they said Gor was lost,  
'Lost in his motherland and uncleland.'  
Ochieng' Ratego said Gor hated his fatherland,  
'He should have been born a woman to be married elsewhere:  
Perhaps in Kanyada and by his uncles!'

The half-brothers sneered and celebrated that Gor was away.  
Together with the sorcerers, the evil ones sang and danced.  
It was a veritable ogres' festival  
Complete with enchanted harps, drums and weird shouts.  
The ogres' festival lasted days and nights,  
Till their bodies became lame with fatigue.

But what was happening in Kanyamwa,  
If not a party for those condemned to die?

## **The Prodigal In-law**

Otuoma of Kwabwai came back from his exile in Kabuoch  
And immediately apologised for his misconduct in the past.  
He knelt down before Ratego  
Saying he would never try the might of the Kanyamwa.  
Ratego laughed and summoned the people to hear the news,  
'Say it again! Say it again!' he urged Otuoma.

Then Otuoma stood upright and swore holding his spear,  
'Never, never shall I try the might of the Kanyamwa  
With whom we've lived like kinsmen,  
With whom we've been in-laws.'  
Then Otuoma narrated,  
'You know, people of our land,  
That our togetherness started a long time ago.

From the very beginning, from the time of Jok.  
Bwai, our eponymous ancestor, saved Jok, your ancestor,  
When his sons fled after a calamity had taken place  
For Jok had been speared by his son Wanjare  
And the others seeing that their father would die  
Ran away for fear of punishment.  
It was Bwai who remained behind to help:  
He pulled the spear from Jok's stomach.  
When Chwanya Ragwar the Fork came back,  
His dying father told him at sunset,  
"Don't ever leave Bwai; you're Bwai's man.  
Your descendants shall intermarry with his."  
And so we intermarry according to the old man's words.  
Don't I have your daughter as my wife?  
Never has it been known since the time of Bwai and Jok  
That a fight can occur between in-laws.'

Everybody agreed that in his plea for mercy and peace,  
The in-law had touched on the truth:  
The bond between Kwabwai and Kanyamwa was everlasting,  
But he was mixing up stories a bit.

Ochieng' Ratego nodded his head, stood up and said,  
'Bwai was saved by Jok, so he had to pay in kind.  
Bwai was picked up while he was lost,  
Having fled from a calamity in Bananaland;  
Jok rescued him from deadly jungles and brought him home.  
It was our great grandmother Awando who brought him up  
Even though she was already bringing up four men.  
Awando brought up her sons:  
Rachuonyo, Chwanya and Wanjare  
And also the two other men who had been picked up:  
Owila and Bwai had been rescued from imminent death.  
One day, a disaster occurred  
Our ancestors—the true ancestors were so brave—  
They went to lay ambush upon a marauding elephant.  
They heard the crashing of bushes and readied themselves  
But Wanjare threw his spear;  
It was not the elephant, but his father Jok that he speared.  
Wanjare fled and sought refuge among the Kisiis  
Where his descendants multiplied and formed a territory.  
But the rest remained behind to comfort the mother  
And see the old man off to the land of the spirits.  
That's when Jok said, "Chwanya take care of Bwai.

Don't ever leave him behind.  
He's your man, meaning, he's your slave."  
And so, we now live with the descendants of Bwai  
And so we marry their women and take care of them.  
If this descendant of Bwai has returned to us for sanctuary,  
It is because of the ancestral message:  
That he should live peacefully and respectfully among us.'

People said that although the in-law had talked well,  
Ratego had spoken better as a person brought up in the *abila* .

It was pots of beer that flowed down the throats of many  
As people celebrated the return of Otuoma  
Which Ratego called 'the surrendering of the in-law'.  
In the end Otuoma said,  
'In-laws come to my home, drink and eat.'

The next morning, our leaders went to Otuoma's early.  
So early in the morning it was;  
Otuoma had just started working on his farm,  
Trapping quails, guinea fowls and game.  
Ratego said, 'What disrespect for a tenant  
Not to usher in his overlords!'  
He stormed into Otuoma's house and brought out beer.  
He broke the etiquette, prompting our daughter to plead,  
'Brothers, let the son of Matoro come before you make merry.  
A man is a chief in his own house,  
So let him come and open the party.'

But Ratego retorted, 'Sister, if Otuoma is not there,  
Should we not drink?'

When Otuoma returned, the pots were almost empty,  
But Otuoma did not show any ill-feeling: he served more beer.

'That bull,' pointed out Ratego to a fat animal,  
'Is what we want!'

Otuoma slaughtered the bull  
And the Kanyamwa men ate to their fill.  
On their way back, the leaders called on more homes  
Sniffed around for more beer among the Kwabwai  
And when they chanced upon it,  
With or without consent of the Kwabwai brewer,

Fell upon it like thirsty animals in dry season.  
'Kanyamwa is a land of plenty,' they said  
Gulping down *mbare* beer.  
'Kanyamwa is the female land,' they said,  
Devouring roasted chickens in Kwabwai homes.

'Kanyamwa is the land of heroes,' they reckoned.  
'This is the land of happy tenants and overlords;  
Now that the Kwabwai have agreed and vowed  
To put their tails in between their legs  
We are where we were in the beginning.'  
Added Ratego, 'And now that that notorious child is away,  
We shall rule this land in peace.'

It was in the evening of another day  
When the sun's eye had turned golden  
And Ratego and his fellows were reclining  
With calabashes of beer and *puga-gi-nyaloo* full of bhang  
When Otuoma arrived with feathers in his hands.  
'In-laws,' he said, 'your sons wrong me everyday.  
Whenever my traps catch birds, however few,  
They come and take them away.  
Only leaving feathers and destroyed traps for me.  
Here are the feathers they left today.'

Ratego was amused.  
He smiled broadly and burst into laughter.  
'Bring a calabash for our in-law,' he ordered.  
Otuoma took his beer dejectedly,  
As Ratego summoned elders to listen to his case.

When the elders had gathered,  
Ratego began to question Otuoma,  
'You say that the boys took birds from your traps?'

'Yes, every bird.'

'Where was that?'

'In my farm.'

'Were the birds flying in the air or walking on the ground?'

'I told you they were in my traps!' replied Otuoma.



‘Slow down, in-law,’ cautioned the elders.

Ratego put down his beer and addressed Otuoma gravely,  
‘In-law, those lads did what was right.  
They took away what was due to them—  
The things from their soil.’

Otuoma peacefully went away,  
But the next day he was back  
To complain about the Kanyamwa herdsmen  
Who had let their cattle maraud his farm.  
Ratego told him to drink and forget about youthful pranks.  
Another day, Otuoma reported that some youths had  
‘Pulled a Kwabwai girl to their *simba* and made her their wife.  
Now the girl cannot have a respectful marriage,  
For her virginity has been broken.  
Only an old man with many wives can marry her.  
What a pity!’

Ochieng’ Ratego and cronies were taking opium.  
When they heard the story,  
They laughed and laughed and laughed  
Till it was not laughter anymore.  
It was derision: a reminder for the Kwabwai and others  
That as tenants-at-will, they had no rights in Kanyamwa.  
‘Who said that fire begets ash?’ asked Ratego.  
‘Who said that?’ he asked glaring at fellow leaders.  
‘Fire begets fire!  
I, Ratego, have said it.  
The Kanyamwa fire has begotten fire.’  
Turning to Otuoma he put the *puga-gi-nyaloo* down,  
And gravely said, ‘We the Kanyamwa are of racing blood.  
We find it difficult to control ourselves  
At the sight of beautiful Kwabwai girls.  
You’re wrong in-law  
To say that the girl will not find a respectable man.  
Bring her here to me  
And I’ll take her as my tenth wife.’

From that day on, Otuoma kept silence  
Till he asked the elders to allow him to build a new home.  
It was normal for a man to build a new home,  
But Otuoma’s was so distantly removed from the others.

People said that an in-law should keep his respectful distance  
So Otuoma was excused for moving away  
To where only smoke from the hearths  
Could be seen merging with the clouds in the sky.  
But how many cows did he present to Ratego  
In order to be allowed to build a new home?  
What feast did he prepare  
On the day of building the new structures?  
Beer was as plenty as water in Lake Lolwe.  
Food was plenty as all the Kanyamwa food put together.  
The Kanyamwa ate, drunk and concluded,  
‘This in-law of ours fears us; he is still our tenant.’  
Otuoma also agreed that he was still a tenant,  
Just like his other Kwabwai fellows.

## **‘NO LAIRS TO CALL THEIRS!’**

People went to congratulate Otuoma in his new home.  
Gor also came from Kanyada to see him  
And the visitor became friends with the host  
After learning of their common exile experiences.  
Otuoma was Gor’s elder and married to his step-sister.  
He had a son, Matoro, a nephew to the Kanyamwa,  
Named after his grandfather as was the custom.  
Matoro was Gor’s friend and agemate  
But Gor was more comfortable talking with Otuoma  
For his thinking power was greater than that of his peers  
And rivalled those of the elders.

In those days, the wisdom  
That keeps friends and relatives wary of each other  
Was only found in Gor Mahia.  
For Otuoma was only his in-law  
Like the hawk is in-law to the fowl  
And was a host and a friend  
Like the cat is a host and friend to the rat.  
That is why Gor said he would sleep soundly  
But with his ears and eyes wide open at Otuoma’s.

When Otuoma spoke, Gor heard the sounds he made  
But only understood the unspoken words.  
When Otuoma laughed, Gor heard only the arrested cry;  
When Otuoma fraternized, Gor discerned the hidden enmity.

The tenant wishes that the landlord dies,

So that he becomes the landlord;  
The landlord wishes that the tenant respects the status quo.  
But Gor was not a landlord—  
Only Otuoma reckoned he was one,  
'You, the landlords, shall become the tenants  
Our time will come so sweetly you'll die of envy for us.'  
So he persuaded Gor to help him in his designs  
Gor said 'Yes', but did nothing to betray his land.

'Your land is your land,' Gor said to himself.  
'What is yours is indeed yours,' he repeated.  
Born in Kanyamwa and reared in there,  
The land was a heavy tusk on him.  
Everywhere Gor went he carried Kanyamwa on him  
Till everybody called him, 'This man from Kanyamwa.'

But the land was not like the prized ivory to be happy about.  
People said the Kanyamwa were lost and so needed a saviour.  
Otuoma said the Kanyamwa were a drunken lot  
Who direly needed somebody to sober them up.  
But where else would they be drunk  
If not at Otuoma's frequent feasts  
Ostensibly held to honour 'the owners of the land'  
But actually meant to muddle them with magic?  
Our people, beware what you're given free of charge,  
Beware what is given ostensibly in your honour.  
One day you'll pay for it.

So Gor kept an eye on this hero of Kwabwai  
Without looking in his direction  
For he pretended to be asleep when the Otuomas were awake  
And was awake when they were asleep.  
Gor, the one who sees even as he sleeps,  
Found out about Otuoma's roots and ways;  
He found out that Otuoma had powerful magic  
And he wanted to possess it to save his land.  
And Otuoma also had other magical powers and secrets  
Which he allowed only his son, Matoro, to share in.

In the middle of the night  
When the land was silent and still  
Matoro went to his father's *abila*  
Leaving Gor behind in his *simba* .  
But Gor followed him, remained outside the hut

And when the divination and counselling had got underway  
He, through some ruse, found his way into the hut  
And watched everything from end to end.

Otuoma divined with cowries.  
As he tossed and flipped them he muttered,  
'Let what the cowries say happen.'  
He gathered the cowries on the floor, like his brood,  
Tossed and flipped them again,  
Let them drop effortlessly on the ground  
And seeing them scatter across the floor,  
He cupped some in his hands chanting,  
'One by one like the young ones off a womb  
Every wild-cat to its lair went  
But those that remained in the old homestead  
Said theirs was every lair in the land.  
They are the cowries in my hand  
To be scattered by none other than themselves.  
Let the blame be off my hand  
For the cowries only drop off my hand.  
Then to relieve themselves of the shame,  
Let the despised wild-cats reign—  
Those who have no lairs to call theirs,  
NO LAIRS TO CALL THEIRS!'

Matoro was nodding, nodding, nodding...  
Till his body was swaying to and fro  
Like a tree in a storm.  
Oh how the magicians enchant!  
Matoro was overwhelmed by the powers of his father.

Then Otuoma gave the cry,  
'Walalala! Things are working well!  
The cowries say so!'

Walalala! Gor was watching keenly  
And the wise diviner could not smell him.  
People, Gor was beyond the smelling of first-rate magicians,  
Even though he was spying on them all the time.

Matoro sobered up and asked,  
'Father the cowries are scattered,  
But might there not be a hand to put them together?  
The wild-cats flee the homestead

But theirs still is the homestead  
Sacred and to be returned to at the opportune moment.'

'Who'll put them together?' asked Otuoma angrily.  
'There's no war as easy as that against drunkards!'  
Then he cooled down and sternly admonished Matoro,  
'Don't talk like a nephew to the Kanyamwa;  
Think like a future leader of the Kwabwai.  
Just boy, our struggle is not unjust!  
Our truth shall scatter the cowries,  
For the enemy is lying and drinking.

'The wild-cat must flee the homestead for good  
Because the ancestors said the big wild-cat must reign  
And the story says we must reign.

'You see, our great ancestor, Bwai,  
Came from Bananaland to help Jok develop land.  
We are not slaves of anybody.  
Jok sighed in relief when Bwai arrived  
And helped him clear the forest,  
And helped him fight off beasts like the *nyalhuu* flying snakes  
That roamed the land, leaving destruction in their wake.  
We are not a picked-up people:  
We picked Jok up when he had fallen.  
At first Jok had no children;  
Later, he got some useless sons  
Who only liked opium, beer, food and women.'

Otuoma turned away in the direction of Kanyamwa,  
Stared agitatedly at an imaginary enemy,  
Slightly lifted his loincloth and cursed, ' *'Thu kiragi!*  
May the opium-smoke and food choke them!  
May the beer drown them!  
And may the women kill them!  
For they are the descendants of sensual people.'

He turned to Matoro and resumed his story,  
'On that day when Jok's sons gathered all the girls in the land  
And made merry with them,  
They refused to guard their farm against beasts  
Even though they were the ones who ate its produce.  
On that day only Bwai was sober.  
When Jok went to reprimand his sons

Their blood was hot,  
Their eyes were red  
And their tongues were loose.  
They shouted at their father,  
“Father, in your days nobody interfered with your parties,  
But now you want to spoil our party!  
Leave us alone!”  
Didn’t the old man go to guard the farm himself?  
On that day of merry-making only our ancestor was sober.  
The true sons of Jok went to the farm at night.  
Drunk and senseless, they saw the crops shaking—  
It was the old man positioned there.  
And they threw their spears there shouting,  
“There is the beast! There it is!”

When Wanjare’s spear caught the old man,  
The sons fled to escape the wrath of the people.  
It was Bwai who remained behind,  
Pulled the spear from the old man,  
Took him home and nursed him there  
And comforted his wife who was lonely.  
Don’t we say, “As lonely as Awando on the plains?”  
But we forget to say that Bwai gave her company.  
As he was dying, Jok told his youngest son, Chwanya—  
He had sneaked back—  
“Behold Bwai saved me as your brothers fled.  
Respect Bwai and let your descendants intermarry.  
You’re Bwai’s man, his slave,  
And he shall get land from you.”  
Now the descendants of Jok shall scatter again  
For they do not respect the words of their elders.  
Bwai must acquire land from Chwanya.  
If the Kanyamwa protest, they shall scatter like cowries.’

When the first cock crowed,  
Otuoma had passed wisdom to Matoro  
And so too to Gor.  
The second day, Otuoma brought out his charms,  
Showed them and imparted their secrets to Matoro  
And so too to Gor who was disguised as a goat in the *abila*.  
The third day, Otuoma summoned Osumba Ojowi;  
Other Kwabwai warriors and wise men and women came too.  
He showed them the plan to finish the Kanyamwa  
And so too to Gor who was disguised as a Kwabwai warrior.

The fourth day, Otuoma summoned Gor and directed,  
‘Go to the Kanyamwa homesteads  
And see what is happening there.’

Otuoma thought he could use Gor;  
But Gor was using him.  
Gor said he needed protection  
Whereupon Otuoma gave him some ash and dust  
To blow before those who might harm him.  
Thus Gor learnt of Otuoma’s magic and protective charm.

People of Kanyamwa had forgotten about Gor  
But isn’t the name Gor so memorable?  
Gor had fled to wander the earth,  
But wasn’t he called the-one-who-goes-and-returns?

Gor returned to Kanyamwa  
And found the jealous ones drinking beer.  
Like birds startled in their feeding,  
Ratego and Gor’s half-brothers were confused.  
Then they pulled themselves together and in unison asked,  
‘What brings you back to *our* land?’

Gor said, looking steadily at them,  
‘The son-in-law you respect is scheming against *our* land.’

With discordant voices the half-brothers said,  
‘Liar! Quack! Jealous One!  
How can you say such a thing about our in-law?  
May be you’re the one plotting against our land  
And now you’ve chosen a scapegoat.  
We’ll tell our son-in-law whom we hear you visit  
To be wary of such conniving, wise ones like you!’

‘I’m surely telling you...’

‘Go away!  
We’ve been fed with truth since our birth  
And we know it when we see it.  
When they are mixed up,  
We distinguish between lies and truth  
Like we distinguish between enemies and friends.’

Gor did not return to Otuoma’s;

He returned to his uncles' place in Kanyada.  
There he contemplated the fate of Kanyamwa.  
It was a land being led by a band of thugs  
And the people were either so blind  
They couldn't know they were being led to death  
Or they were too powerless to do anything.  
It was so difficult to rescue these people  
Even though danger was looming,  
Sneaking in like a plague.

Sometimes Gor became desperate  
And considered staying in Kanyada for good.  
His mother's people had problems,  
But they were dedicated to build their land in harmony.

He married Awino ny'Obonyo and wondered:  
Where would our children belong?  
He married other women and wondered the same.  
Even though the elders still called him a child,  
He was now an adult.  
And even his marriage had been delayed  
Because he was a man with no place to call his own.  
His agemates had big children and he was yet to have one.

## **What Magic Lies Beyond**

'You cannot abandon your land,' said Gor.  
'You must return to it at an opportune moment.'  
Gor did not want to be kept away from his land  
By drunkards, opium addicts and a proud band of thugs.  
He decided to teach these quacks and their cheer-leaders  
That he was Gor Mahia, the elect of Ogalo Ng'injo.  
He wanted to return in a big way.  
But a man who has been away for long  
Must be well prepared for his return.

Gor had the magic of his grandfather Ogalo  
That magic was like his bodily limb or blood.  
The tricky one also had magic from Otuoma.  
His maternal grandfather, Jema, had also taught him magic:  
It was the magic that held the people together  
For Jema was the Kanyada magician.  
But Gor wanted to know more:  
He wanted to know what held the earth together,  
What kept the sky from falling,



What prevented the sun from burning out  
And stopped the abundant water from drying out  
Or from simply submerging the earth.  
The son of Ogada wanted to know and use knowledge.  
He thought of Ogalo Ng'injo, his grandfather  
Who spent all his life hunting and gathering wisdom  
And turned the wisdom into the word to be kept like seed.  
Ogalo had led people because he knew so much  
And had the word in every situation.  
Knowledge was in magic, the elder had said.

Gor knew that what magic lay beyond Ramba  
Was like beasts in the wilderness:  
One had to capture and tame them or they would destroy one.  
He was sad to be ignorant of what lay beyond the horizon,  
For he needed the knowledge if he was to rule the land.

Otuoma had more knowledge:  
That son of Matoro had travelled far for knowledge  
And he was wiser than any other Kanyamwa person.

Gor decided he was not going to stay  
With the ignorance of what lay beyond the horizon.  
So Gor walked and run and flew till he reached Olambwe  
At a place called Ruma where Oyamo Odidi lived.  
Ruma was a valley and plain teeming with wild animals  
And there were very few people living there.  
When Gor reached there he found people mourning  
With the name 'Oyamo Odidi' in their mouths:  
'He's a sorcerer; he's killed all our relatives!'

Gor bypassed Oyamo Odidi,  
For he didn't want to possess 'medicine' that kills.  
He wanted medicine that cures and builds.  
When Oyamo saw Gor bypassing him, he shouted from far,  
'I'm seeing you just passing by  
As if you own this land.  
I can make you food for lions now!'  
But Gor was not in the mood of starting war that early  
So he said, 'If you can make me food for lions, small man,  
I can make you feed for vultures.'  
And he went away, leaving Oyamo Odidi in a rage.

Gor crossed the Huma Bay and saw that the Lake was good

Probably good enough to live in as on land,  
Only it teemed with dangerous animals:  
Hippos, crocodiles, the fierce *lukwata* beasts and snakes.  
But Gor tamed all of them, befriended all of them,  
And he safely crossed and reached Karachuonyo,  
The home of Nyakiti k'Ogutu, at the foot of Mount Huma.  
What magic did Nyakiti have? Gor wanted to know.  
He wanted to know what sustained the people of Mount Huma  
Where the largest snakes in the Lake country resided.  
Gor's choice of Nyakiti as the source of knowledge was apt,  
For Nyakiti was the Karachuonyo Magician:  
Feared and respected, hated and loved,  
Cursed and blessed, insulted and lauded.

Nyakiti welcomed Gor into his *abila*  
But was quite uneasy in his guest's presence:  
He moved here and there, like the proverbial Aringo Misalo  
Who could not plant his buttocks on any chair.  
He felt the presence of different kinds of magic in Gor.  
Fear overcame him as he realized that he was not prepared  
To host such a powerful personage.

Then Gor made a request:  
'Son of Ogutu, I want you to treat me.'  
Nyakiti replied, 'It's well grandson to Ogalo.  
Let me bring my tools.'  
He dashed out, happily excused to leave the room.

Ai! What a guest is Gor Mahia!  
Nyakiti saw a bull elephant standing in the doorway  
Arresting all his actions and thoughts.  
The elephant stood still and Nyakiti stood still:  
Nothing happened for the whole day  
Except that Nyakiti was holed up in his *abila*  
As the elephant blocked the doorway.  
Later, it was Gor who turned into his human form,  
Sat in his former seat and then commented,  
'So son Ogutu, even a magician is not free from shock.  
The way you stood there still like a dry tree,  
One would think you needed immediate treatment!'

Nyakiti was still restless, but enraged,  
So he decided to act like the owner of the home.  
He commanded Gor Mahia to get out of the home

And locked the gate behind him saying,  
'You are the strangest being I've ever seen!  
In all my life, I've seen many strange things:  
I've seen men tame hyaenas and leopards,  
I've seen men ride crocodiles and hippos;  
I've seen big *nyalhuu* snakes flying from Huma to the Lake;  
I've seen the twin Kalenjiri men in secret talk,  
Send each other messages through bees.  
I've seen the freak who walked on two fingers;  
I've seen the diviner who captured voices of all;  
I've seen the Fish-man who spent the day in the Lake  
And retreated at night to Mount Huma...  
But never have I seen a man turn into an elephant.'

He said as he tightly locked the gate,  
'Ai! What a strange guest you are!  
Go, go away and don't ever return here.  
I hate strange games.'

But Gor told Nyakiti, 'For treatment  
I shall surely come back, son of Ogutu.  
Does the doctor have a choice on who to treat?'

## Vultures and a Dog

So Gor's magic overwhelmed the whole Karachuonyo.  
In the whole of the south of Winam Gulf,  
Nobody beat Gor in wisdom and magic.  
Whenever he went people said,  
'Gor is coming! Open the way for him!'  
And he would be let to pass even in enemy territory.

But around the whole Lake,  
There were still a more powerful people.  
So Gor traversed rivers, wildernesses and the Lake  
Till on the fourth day he reached the Kagose in Tanganyika.  
The Kagose had smelled him from afar and felt his power.  
Since they had never seen such power in a single man,  
They called a meeting in which they decided on what to do:  
'This is a man not to fight with the thorax,  
Nor is he a man to show your true self!'

They turned into huge black things:  
Giant, fierce vultures enough to bring an elephant down.  
Gor too turned into a fierce dog as powerful as a lion.

When the Kagose saw Gor turn into a dog, they said,  
‘This man has come for war;  
He must be fought!’

The vultures charged at the dog on the ground;  
The dog jumped clean over them.  
The vultures attacked the dog in the air;  
The dog came home on the ground,

Snapped at vultures with canines...  
Claws against claws; dagger-like beaks against jaws.  
Wings against paws and feathers against hair...  
The fight oh!  
Gor yoo !  
Grab the ugly birds one by one  
Hurl them on the ground till the last one!

The fight oh!  
It went on and on.  
Day One: the vultures thought they would win.  
Day Two: the dog thought it would win.  
But nobody won; only grasses were crushed,  
Waters muddled and bushes destroyed.  
Day Four: the contestants became tired of the endless fight.  
At dawn of that day they made a truce.

The exhausted vultures told the dog,  
'Stop pretending, Gor Mahia, tell us what you want.'  
The dog said, 'You are the most powerful magicians  
In the country around the Great Lake Lolwe.  
I want you to treat me.'  
The dog and vultures made peace,  
Transformed into their former selves, Gor and the Kagose,  
And communed for days until Gor left.  
Thus Gor acquired the wisdom of the Kagose  
And came back with their power.  
Henceforth, he could turn into a vulture or any fierce bird.

## The River Urine

Walking back from Tanganyika,  
Gor was as bright as the eye of the sun  
And as sparkling as the Lolwe waters.  
When you come from Tanganyika,  
You pass through Kadem and Karungu,  
Both territories belonging to descendants of Chwanya,  
Then you reach Kanyamwa.  
Gor wanted to see his people,  
But he never contemplated leading them,  
Till they themselves would need him.

Ochieng' Ratego learnt of his coming  
Dispatched a gang to finish him on the way.  
He told the gang that should they fail in their mission,

He would eliminate them by having them buried alive.  
So sure was he that Gor was going to be killed  
That he gathered his cronies at his *abila*  
To celebrate the end of the cause of his worries  
With beer, opium and women.  
'Between Kanyamwa and Karungu,  
He shall die before he steps on our land.'

Knowing that Gor was a master at disguise,  
The gang killed everyone coming via Karungu,  
That is, everybody *en route* from Tanganyika.  
But they could not kill women in war or peace:  
It was an abomination untreatable by the best magicians.  
And certainly, they had no problem with old women.

A hag, stooping and carrying an old basket on her head  
Encountered the gang and engaged them in a conversation.  
She asked them what was their business by the road  
And warned them against killing travellers,  
'Don't ever kill travellers, oh fierce hippos!  
That too is an abomination.'  
The gang became uneasy and angry.  
'Be off and don't ever look back,' they said.  
Once he had reached the Kayambo village of his father,  
Gor sent word to the gang thus,  
'Tell those killers, to disperse:  
The man they were waiting for is in Kanyamwa.  
Tell them that the hag they drove into Kanyamwa  
Was none other than Gor.'

The gang were terrified.  
'So the hag was none other than Gor?'  
At the prospect of being buried alive,  
They fled without looking back  
And scattered on the face of the earth  
Like cowries off a diviner's hand.

Gor made straight for Ochieng Ratego's homestead  
And there at the *abila* came face to face with the elders.  
The eyes that looked up at him!  
They were like thousands of burning stars  
Raging at the earth in a series of droughts.  
If stares were fire, Gor would have melted  
Like oil in the *hasigro* pot.

Aha, how oil melts *THEE* !! in the *hasigro* pot!  
Bug Gor did not melt in the *abila* ;  
He stared back at the elders, bemused.  
How the lazy rage at the interruption of their indulgence!  
Coolly, as though it was what was expected of him then,  
Gor said, 'My elders, I'm thirsty after a long journey.  
Can you please give me a little beer for tasting?'

Ratego's eyes burned; his stomach rumbled.  
Oh, Ratego's rage! He wondered aloud,  
'So this child now thinks his testicles are big enough  
To fill the cups of his tiny hands?'  
Turning to Gor, he shouted,  
'What impunity for a mere child to ask for elder's beer!  
Get out!'

In the whole *abila* only one elder, Odhul, was kind  
He said, 'We the descendants of Teful,  
Our arms are always open for guests.  
We eat with our friends and enemies alike.'  
He took a calabash full of beer saying,  
'Let us give this nephew to the Kanyada  
And bless him with a little beer for tasting.'  
But Ratego grabbed the calabash from Odhul's hands  
And hurled it outside, splashing the drunken elders with beer.

Gor stormed out of the hut saying,  
'Drink that beer in peace!'  
The raging Ratego dashed out of the house  
Intending to follow up his schemes by himself.  
Things were not working out as he had planned.  
There must be traitors about; he wanted to kill everybody.  
People said that war ever lurked in Ratego's stomach  
Waiting for the slightest provocation.  
Now he was uncomfortable with the war inside him  
Until he would unleash it on someone.  
But he was also uncomfortable with his bladder  
Until he could empty it of the contents.  
It was so full he could hardly walk.

Ratego retched, staggered outside;  
He stood precariously by the hedge  
To pass water as well as to pull himself together.  
When he started peeing, he lost control of his bladder:

He just couldn't stop it.  
Smelly urine was coming out copiously:  
The bladder was a dam that had its bank broken  
And there was no stopping it in its destruction.  
The alarmed Ratego shouted,  
'Oh fellow elders, there you are in celebration inside  
And here I am in a bad state outside!'  
The elders in a drunken rush outside asked,  
'What again?'  
They saw a vast river flowing from Ratego's manhood.  
Although their bladders were also full,  
They feared to obey the call of nature  
Lest they create other rivers and even another Lolwe.  
But the pressure from their bladders overwhelmed them  
And they too started passing pungent water.

People experienced a deluge: pungent water raging,  
And destroying life in the drought-stricken land.  
The River Urine, they called it.  
They thought some enemy had caused trouble  
In which case it should be re-directed,  
Certainly to the vile enemy.  
They came upstream to discover the source.  
They crowded at Ratego's homestead  
And it was a shame for the elders to be seen naked  
With their things turned into sources of the smelly River Urine  
And causing a problem in the land like witches.

'Yaye!' cried the elders.  
'Summon for us that lad!  
Let him come and save us!  
Let him have all the beer in this land  
So long as our bladders are stopped.'  
As Gor had not gone far;  
He was soon found and brought to the elders  
Who staggered in their pungent water,  
Pointed out all the river to Gor, saying,  
'Nephew to the Kanyada can you transfer this our problem?'

Do you transfer or eliminate a problem?  
Gor sympathised with these misled fellows.  
They believed a force outside of them  
Was the cause of their problem  
And that it could never be eliminated,



So it could only be transferred to some other people.  
Why couldn't they see that their problem  
Was the fruit of their greed and corruption?  
Do the herdsmen of the people drink and smoke all day long  
Hating to be interrupted and reminded of their weakness?  
And why should a problem only be redirected elsewhere  
Rather than dealt with and eliminated altogether?  
It was no wonder then that the problems would circulate  
And eventually wreak havoc in the land.

When the elders saw Gor to be in deep thinking  
They ordered for pots of beer to be brought to him  
So as to rejuvenate him and inspire his kindness.  
'Give him the beer! Give him the beer!' they said.  
They hated to be drowned in their pungent water.  
The respectful grandson of Ogalo:  
He knew he should only taste beer,  
Not gulp it down like water  
For, don't we say, our people,  
That beer and opium destroyed Kanyamwa?  
Could beer and opium also destroy Gor?  
No; he took one small calabash full of beer,  
And the elders' problem immediately ended.

The elders tucked their things in their *abola* skirts  
And in shame hurriedly left.  
Gor left the beerhouse hurriedly  
For the wise one does not linger inside rot.

People also left in wonder  
Knowing that Gor was as serious as floods  
And as righteous as the ancestors.  
All that Gor had said and done, they now considered.  
'This grandson of Ogalo can be our saviour,' they said.

## Were's Party

The elders regrouped and desired to curse Gor  
And put as a priority issue his elimination.  
Ratego said, 'My people, how can a child  
Whose testicles can hardly fill the cup of his hands  
Humiliate the grey-haired, wise ones like this?  
Let us find ways of transferring problems to him  
And thus do away with him.'

The elders looked for a place with plenty of beer and opium  
Where they could discuss all the problems and Gor.  
Aha, they were provoking the Lion of the Escarpment!  
They were provoking the Grandson to Ogalo the Crumbs  
And they did not really know who they were playing with  
For Gor had crawled like a snake,  
Flew like a bird  
And bounded like a beast;  
For Gor had flashed like lightning  
Shook like an earthquake  
And erupted like a volcano.

What curse could destroy Gor?  
What is a curse  
If it is uttered by the cursed?  
What is a curse  
If it is aimed at the blessed?  
People of our homestead,  
Who could curse Gor  
That he himself would not be cursed?

What trick could check Gor?  
What trick from opium smokers,  
What ruse from beer guzzlers  
Could check Gor?

The gang thought Gor was asleep,  
But the Wary Hare was wide awake.  
They thought Gor was absent,  
But he was present in Kanyamwa,  
The glare of his eyes on the vile elders.

The elders approached Odhul to host the meeting  
But the nephew to the Kwabwai refused firmly.  
They eyed Odhul like a strange creature,  
Said he was jealous, treacherous and insane.  
Odhul the Brown; nephew to the Kwabwai:  
Odhul the Hedge that has an assortment of shrubs.  
They said that no good would come from him:  
A nephew to tenants and 'a son of his mother'.

Odhul refused to brew beer and cook for the elders  
Although he was rich enough to do so.  
Odhul spent most of his time with his mother's people,

Were tenants people to keep company?  
Were the Kwabwai *people* even?

Who would talk well of Odhul?  
He was nobody.  
Who would say his praise names anymore?  
Now, he was not the Brown;  
Now, he was not the Hedge:  
He was just unpraiseworthy.  
But the land would never run short of heroes  
And Were Onyango was one such.

Were had been bored by lack of action in his land;  
This son of Onyango was bored with beer and opium.  
So he went far afield to his mother's people;  
He went to Kamwango to look for action there.  
He found his mother's people in disarray.  
Scattered by powerful neighbours,  
They had no land of their own;  
They had no gardens or trees to call their own.  
Hunger was their mother,  
Disease their father,  
Death their sibling  
And Suffering a kinsman of them all.

Were gathered his mother's people  
Told them to die in war  
Not in peaceful hunger and disease.  
He led his mother's people against the neighbours  
And carved for them a territory.

The Kamwango were grateful,  
But Were found the pride of his life.  
He called the Kanyamwa elders for a party  
And the elders were happy  
They had spent months sniffing for a party  
Where they could curse Gor  
With their arses thrown to the sky.  
But only Were knew the meaning of his party  
It meant, 'Fool, eat to your full  
And open your ears wide;  
I'm in command.'

Were had to narrate his exploits first.

At first, it was Were talking  
Next it was Were and beer talking  
And then it was only beer talking.

‘Giving birth to a person like me is difficult,  
People of our homestead,  
I’m telling you the truth:  
War is difficult,  
But to have a war leader like me is more difficult.

‘My uncles rose from the dead  
When they saw I had arrived.  
Were the Kanyamwa paying the bridewealth twice  
By sending their daughter’s son lead them in war?

‘I reached the enemies by one leap  
And finished them by one sweep of the hand.  
Ayee , my buffalo-skin shield!  
It had a thousand arrows stuck to it  
And another thousand spears bent on it.  
Victory came our way like it was our stolen thing retrieved,  
So my uncles now have a territory of their own.

‘People of our land, war is great,  
But greater still is the man who wins it  
I, Were Onyango,  
Won the war for the Kamwango;  
I, Were Onyango,  
Am the greatest warrior in Ramba  
Yet my people have not made me the *osumba*  
Who can say I’m not the *osumba* ?  
My uncles made me their *Osumba Mirwayi*  
So here too I am *Osumba Mirwayi* .’

Were Onyango eyed the crowd with bloodshot eyes.  
He alone knew the meaning of his party:  
It meant, ‘You fool, eat to your full  
But I’ll heap you with insults to the full.’

Into the *angere* jocular insults, Were plunged  
And the elders urged him on  
To say something about everybody.

‘If he’s as short as a traditional stool,

You sit on him;  
If he's as huge as a hippo,  
You ride him  
And if he's as soft as pumpkin...'

'You eat him!' was the chorus.

And everybody knew who was short,  
Who was huge or soft.  
But Were Onyango wasn't yet over with the *angere*  
The elders urged him on  
And pointed at a fellow elder  
To receive a jocular insult most foul.

'Among us here,' went on Were,  
'Are the rich who recoil like roasting meat  
Whenever they are asked to host a party.  
But I'm the wealthy man  
Who invited his fellows for a party.  
Who says I am not a chief?'

Were glared at the surprised faces round the beer pot.  
Odhul shot up and demanded to know  
Who these rich men who recoil like roasting meat are.  
'Perhaps the likes of you,' said Were simply.

But Odhul was hurt. He said,  
'You, Were, do not deserve to boast before people.  
You've only fought half as many wars as I've fought  
And for that reason, wait till I ask for the *osumba* title  
Before you ask for the same.  
As for the wealth you have—  
The loot you got from that scuffle with a weak enemy—  
It cannot feed the elders for more than a day.'

Ratego was too drunk to make out the quarrel clearly  
But he said that should children be found  
To be jostling for positions like animals at water point  
They will be caned severely.

Were took some time absorbing Odhul's joke,  
It was mean and demeaning.  
Glaring at Odhul in a hostile moment ever  
Since Ratego glared at Gor in the *abila*,

Were realized that Odhul did not fear him.  
What then did his party mean,  
If not to let fools cower before him?  
He thought of snatching beer from his guest  
And at the same time wondered how a fool like Odhul  
With someone's beer rushing down his throat  
Could be that rude to the owner of the beer.  
He opted to remind Odhul  
Of the hospitality that had made him so eloquent.

'You Odhul,' Were said,  
'Is it not my beer that has gone into your head?  
Tell us while we are here in my own home  
How many parties you've hosted in your own home.  
Tell us Odhul, tell us!  
And then deny Odhul, deny!  
Deny whether you're roasting meat  
Whenever a party is required of you  
And then you shall tell us Odhul, you shall!  
You shall tell us when you last hosted a party.'

Nobody could remember when Odhul last hosted a party,  
Not even Odhul himself.

But everybody remembered that Odhul had turned down  
A request to host a party for the elders.  
The elders cheered Were as he insulted Odhul  
And did damage to his self-confidence.  
Odhul shot up and with a sweeping look over the elders,  
Said he would never invite drunkards to his home.  
'You're the elders who should be leading the people  
Yet you gulp down beer like water all day long.'

The elders threw Odhul out of the party  
Because he was 'talking like a child'.  
Odhul said: 'Drink that beer of yours!'

Then Were said aloud,  
Actually for the benefit of Odhul:  
'Jealously is really a bad thing:  
It destroys homes of polygamous men.  
That man who is now proudly walking away  
Wiggling his buttocks along because of my beer  
Is jealous of my heroism.

How could he grunt here like an ant-bear  
When his maternal uncles are our slaves?  
Behold, I have freed my uncles single-handedly;  
I have freed the Kamwango.'

Odhul fled in a huff as the elders laughed and jeered at him.  
When Odhul was finally out of sight,  
The revellers broke into songs.  
Olando Jawer rose up, danced and led in song:

Solo: *Beer or meat, which is sweeter?*  
Chorus: *I left meat at home to come and drink here*  
*I surely left meat behind to chase beer.*

Olando listed many food items  
And each time the chorus in wise comparison  
Declared beer was sweeter.  
Then Olando mischievously asked:  
'Beer or opium, which is sweeter?'  
The elders laughed and said that was a difficult question.

Were brought out his giant *puga-gi-nyaloo*  
Everybody partook of the strong opium smoke inside it.  
Ochieng' Ratego burst out into a war chant.  
'My buffalo-hide shield!  
My buffalo-hide shield!' he shouted.  
He was brought his shield and spear.  
The warrior performed a war dance,  
Ran helter-skelter,  
Thrust his spear at imaginary enemies shouting:  
'*Jowi! Jowi ! War is in my blood!*'  
He ran toward the setting sun;  
He jumped into the sky;  
He drove his spear into the ground;  
He danced behind his shield  
And uttered his war cries and song,  
But those who had known him from his youth  
Noticed that the agility and the grace was gone;  
His voice was no longer the roar of thunder.  
They wondered whether he would lead in any war again  
And felt fear eating their insides  
Like termites eat into rotten twigs.

After a short while, Ratego was spent like grass fire;

He settled down for opium, jokes and puns.  
As he drew a prolonged smoke from the *puga* , he said:  
'Everything is sweet in nakedness:  
You get a sweet potato,  
Peel it and sweet is the naked inside.  
You get a banana, take off the peel  
And sweet is the naked inside.  
You get a woman  
Rip off her clothes and sweet is...'  
The elders burst out into ecstasy.

The seed of the opium crackled; the beer foamed  
And the elders smoked and boozed.  
At each crackling of the opium seeds, they made jokes  
And sang praises to themselves, to beer and to opium.  
Were slaughtered one ram after another for his guests.  
Olando Jawer changed the words of his numerous songs  
To suit the occasion and praise the heroes:

*Were mak'Onyango is the wizard  
Who pretends he has invited elders for beer  
Yet he has more for his guests.*

Generosity came to the elders in their intoxicated state  
And they invited every passer-by to the party, saying,  
'So-and-so why pass by when we have a party here?'  
And Ochieng' Ratego pleaded with the opium,  
'Oh opium guide me along please!  
By midnight the whole Kanyamwa was at Were's  
Asking the dawn to refuse to come  
For the night was just too sweet to be ended.  
'You close the eye of the sun,' they said,  
'And sweet is the night's blanket.'  
Aha, the dawn came but they ignored it  
As they had ignored Odhul when he set out in a huff.

## Ripe Fruit

The world turned upside down.  
Odhul bypassed his home;  
Yes, that furious man was completely deranged.  
He bypassed the Kanyamwa homesteads without talking  
And went straight to his maternal uncles.  
People said that Otuoma's magic was working on him;  
But Odhul said he had to do as Were had done to his uncles



So as to allay more insults from the likes of Were.  
He also said that the Kanyamwa were stupid,  
Being so boastful and pompous,  
Living in the glory of bygone times.  
These were Odhul's words:  
'We were once hatched out of an egg with yolk,  
But now we come out of an empty shell.  
Kanyamwa is a land of no heroes!'

So Odhul would make himself a hero elsewhere  
By leading his uncles in war.  
So he went to the Kwabwai and said,  
'My uncles, I have come. Come!  
Let me show you how to acquire land.'

Otuoma danced and danced in joy and said,  
'Our people, the time has indeed come!  
Now that our daughter's son has come,  
We shall indeed acquire land.'

Odhul took the Kwabwai to Nyahera  
Which was still Kanyamwa land.  
But Otuoma said,  
'Now that our nephew has shown us here,  
It is indeed our land.  
Whoever claims it shall be our enemy.'

The Kanyamwa woke up,  
Made drunken noises, cursed,  
And promised to teach the Kwabwai a lesson.  
Ochieng' Ratego said that he would not live  
To see tenants own the land of their lords.  
Chief Ong'ondo, though too old to command an army said,  
'The land of the Chiefs must not be carved out anymore!'

But the Kwabwai moved even closer to the Kanyamwa homes  
And claimed that all the Kanyamwa land was now theirs.  
Otuoma told them that a people led by drunkards  
Should not have the privilege of being the overlords.  
Otuoma said,  
'War is a ripe fruit  
Ready to drop on the lush ground  
And we shall all partake of its flesh and juice.'

And indeed the fruit dropped.

Some Kanyamwa youths were grazing  
When the Kwabwai came and rustled their cattle.  
They tried to fight off the rustlers,  
But whips were landed on their skins  
And sticks on their joints.  
The Kwabwai said the Kanyamwa were children  
Who should only be whipped, not killed;  
Caned, not injured.

Madness was in everybody's head.  
The Kanyamwa diviners beat their heads on *ohinga* walls.  
Oyoko wuo' Nyabunde and Otho k'Odul  
Slaughtered goats and studied their insides  
To see the fortunes of the impending war.  
The news, when it came out, was bad:  
The Kanyamwa would be defeated unless...  
And they feared to say it  
Till the raging Ratego exploded,  
'Unless what?'  
'Unless you lead the war,' said the diviners evasively.  
'Who said I'd not lead war against these weakest creatures?  
The Kwabwai are flying termites:  
Enthusiastic in the beginning but desperate in the end  
Losing their wings and falling heavily onto the ground  
To be mercilessly crushed underfoot.'

The diviners gathered courage and told Ratego,  
'You shall only lead the war to be killed—  
Only then shall the Kanyamwa win the war.'

Hee! Fire was raging in Kanyamwa.  
How could the diviners think of a great *osumba*  
As a sacrifice, as a goat,  
Just to defeat Otuoma's ragtag army?  
Ratego and his cronies were enraged.

But didn't our elders say that the land  
Is greater than the greatest men?  
Our people, does any land win a war  
Without sacrificing its sons?  
If you hate sacrifice then avoid war.

Ratego ran amok like a mad bull  
And ordered the diviners to be killed.  
But the people refused to obey the orders  
And Ratego hugged, like two brides,  
A pot of beer and a bundle of opium.  
'How can flying ants kill me?  
The world has turned upside down.  
Peace be in my heart,' he said.

The Kwabwai sent word that the Kanyamwa  
Were wasting their time by not attacking.  
'Why not behave like the heroes they claim they are  
And come out into the open?' they asked.  
Ratego arranged his pots of beer and opium leaves and said,  
'Never in my military career have I fought a war  
In which a kinsman is leading the enemy.  
This war is simply bad.'

The Kwabwai swooped upon the land at dawn.  
Our people, the Kwabwai know how to fight!  
Their army was not made up of men only,  
Even their women were there, wearing warrior garbs  
Making their army appear ten times larger.

When the Kanyamwa saw the Kwabwai army,  
They said the whole world had turned against them  
And they fled and scattered like *goche* wild-cats.  
Our people fled and left the old chief behind.  
The few warriors who resisted were routed.  
Ratego carried his drinks and drugs away with him.

The Kwabwai thought Kanyamwa was no more.  
People thought Gor was no more,  
But Gor was around.  
He had heard the plight of his people and the old chief.  
In the Kanyamwa desolate homes he wandered,  
Witnessing the fruits of pride and pomp of the leaders.  
In the days of Ratego, foolishness had ruled the land;  
Drunkenness and bravado had destroyed the land.  
The world had indeed turned upside down  
When Ratego was allowed to roam and growl in the land  
Like a wild beast set to stay with humans for some time.  
And he had tapped in people's weaknesses to win them over.  
Yes, the Ratego spirit had permeated the Kanyamwa heart;

Yes, Ratego and his cronies had tamed the Kanyamwa bull.  
They could sing to the bull and take it to any playground;  
They could scratch or slap its underside  
And the bull would obey their commands docilely;  
Yes, they could grip the bull's horns without being gored.  
The bull had been so tamed that it would dance on cue  
And fight another when ordered to do so.

Did not our elders say that you should not  
Show your fat backside and big chest to the world?  
By displaying, boasting and singing praises about this bull,  
The Kanyamwa leaders were exposing their backside.

What have the leaders done to the people  
If not to cause death and suffering?  
Oh, how can leaders be so selfish,  
Worse than the vilest worms?  
A worm may not kill; it may take some food from its host.  
But the leaders devour completely and kill their subjects.

Now, I am the diviner who baffles the leaders  
And tightly ties their hands and legs with words.  
Now, I am Adegan'ny'Olando who received the word  
And I want to pass the word on to you our people.  
I want to put a question to you our leaders:  
Whom shall you depend on after sucking our blood dry  
Till in pain, hunger and exhaustion we die?  
I ask you cannibals with bloody mouths:  
What shall you devour after you've devoured us all?  
*Thu kiragi!*  
May you devour one another up to the last cannibal!

## **Lone Warrior Fights Army**

'The Kanyamwa are finished!'  
That was Otuoma and the Kwabwai talking.  
True, the Kanyamwa were scattered all over the earth  
Like cowries off a giant diviner's hands.  
And they cried on tottering legs, on all fours,  
'Where is that miraculous one of our own?  
We want the grandson to Ogalo;  
He alone can transfer this our problem.'

Gor was in the desolate Kanyamwa.  
He trod on ashes where there had been prosperous homes,

Passed among the skeletons of trees which once had lush leaves  
Then through the desolate home of Ogada at Sinyo  
And reached the home of Chief Ong'ondo  
Who had been abandoned to die, so old and emaciated.

But the Chief was not there!

Gor climbed the Gamba Hill of his grandfather,  
Looked around and wondered,  
Would the whole country around the Lake Lolwe  
Bow at the mention of the name Ogalo the Crumbs?  
Hadn't all the crumbs become proud and independent?  
But Gor didn't doubt the ancient prophecy  
That the land would never run short of heroes.

Close up, Gor watched the land in pain.  
It was like a fallen hero  
With black patches where it had been burnt,  
Gaping, red wounds where fight and flight had caused erosion  
And wilting life where the vegetation had been damaged.

But the Awach River was flowing on and on  
On its way to the sparkling Lake in the sun.  
Gor's throat felt dry, but he was frozen on Gamba Hill  
And his eyes fascinated by the living river, as it were.  
Down and quietly, it flowed  
Until it led Gor's eyes to a banana grove  
Where the Kwabwai were celebrating—  
Already!

There in the fertile grove by the river,  
The Kwabwai had camped.  
Amidst shouts of ecstasy and guttural war cries,  
Thumping of the feet, jumping of both men and women  
And mock fights by both men and women warriors,  
The Kwabwai were singing the *agoro* victory songs.

Lonely like Awando on the plains,  
Gor came downhill and headed for the camp.

When he was near enough, he studied the scene.  
Women were ululating in joy;  
Spears were raised high in victory.  
The *agoro* songs stung Gor's ears.

Opium smoke formed a cloud and a shadow over the river.  
Everybody was rejoicing—men and women, old and young,  
Except...Except a pitiable figure amidst the crowd.  
It was none other than the Old Man of Kanyamwa;  
It was none other than Chief Ong'ondo!

Dusty, wet and sad, he was made to sit on his haunches  
With his straight arms resting on his knees.  
Children danced around as they insulted him  
And the elders spat upon him like vile snakes.

'  
All put things on his dishevelled white hair and chanted,

*My hen is laying eggs on somebody's hair  
Who is he?*

And the answer was full-heartedly chorused,

*The ugly chief of Kanyamwa  
The ugly chief of cowards  
The ugly chief of Kanya-shit!*

'The ugly people of Kwa-something!' cursed Gor  
As he flew into a rage and asked a thousand questions at a go.  
Where was Otuoma to show that he was a saviour,  
Not the foolish inciter of his people?  
Where was he to complain about the evil deeds of Ratego,  
But not about the uncouth behaviour of his own people?  
Where was he to show that the Kanyamwa hated him  
More than he hated them?  
Where was he to show that he only wanted a territory  
Rather than the whole world for his pride?  
And to imagine that he was a son-in-law  
Conniving at the brutal treatment of a father-in-law!

When Gor was enraged, he would puff like a thousand snakes.  
Oh yes!  
The Black Mamba of the Escarpment was set to massacre.  
When Gor was in a rage, he would roar like a thousand lions.  
Oh yes!  
The Lion of Kanyamwa was set to attack.

No one must insult the land!  
No one must insult the chief!

Here where he stood Gor clasped his buffalo-hide shield;  
There where he dashed he wielded a spear and danced for war  
And there where he danced, he waged war.

Into the Kwabwai crowd, he stormed and screamed.  
The lone warrior, oh!  
Grandson to Ogalo, nephew to the Kanyada!  
He was not noticed until many had fallen in his path—  
Gor was too fast for the eyes,  
Faster still for the ears.

Confusion reigned supreme,  
And the Kwabwai did not see reason as to why their legs  
Should not carry them away as fast as possible.

Gor shouted, 'My people, come quickly!  
They are running away!'  
When the Kwabwai heard that, they said,  
'So we are besieged by a large army!'  
Each of them said,  
'My legs, what meal did I take that you too didn't take?'  
And they urged their legs to carry them away faster.  
The Kwabwai were flying away  
Like birds whose bush-nests were burning.  
They fled like rats that had heard the cat's name.

Gor laughed and laughed and then said,  
'The only thing that the Kwabwai know is running.  
I never knew the Kwabwai are the fastest runners in the land.'

He then turned to the old chief and said,  
'Brother, let us go.'

It was a scene from the ancestral times  
That Gor had re-enacted. Long ago,  
Onyango Rabala had rescued his father from the Yimbo.  
The Yimbo struck from the Lake  
And people fled, leaving the old Chwanya behind.  
The raiders took time collecting everything;  
For some reason, the old man was a prized catch.  
They then put the loot in the boats;  
Chwanya too was tied in one boat.  
Then the Yimbo settled under trees at the beach to take opium,

As they waited for the tumultuous Lake to calm down,  
Before setting out for their home around the Lake.  
Chwanya's sons were also taking opium somewhere  
Debating on whether to rescue their father or not.  
Then when the opium had entered their blood, they said,  
'That man called our father is too old!  
Fight to rescue him? He's too old and useless!  
We cannot waste our blood and energy!  
Let the Yimbo do with him what they like, if any.'

It was Onyango Rabala who differed with his brothers  
And single-handedly rescued his father  
By killing and scaring away the enemy.  
Hence he was called Rabala, the Rebel,  
For he always rebelled against his brother's folly.  
And Onyango's blood was flowing in Gor's veins.

Gor carried away the feeble chief,  
Ill and demoralised from the persecution.  
Word went and reached the frightened Kanyamwa  
That the Kwabwai had been soundly beaten by the single Gor.  
The Kanyamwa were excited. They said,  
'We have said and said again  
That that miraculous son of Ogada should lead us.  
Now he has proved us right.'

Ratego grumbled and said Kanyamwa could do without Gor.  
People were incensed by his behaviour  
Citing his refusal to die for the land as an abomination.  
But Ratego performed his war dance,  
Grasping *puga-gi-nyaloo* in his hands.  
Some people wanted to kill him;  
Yet others with whom he had misruled the land  
Said they were ready to die with him—meaning what?  
They were ready to kill their people so that Ratego may live.  
What a people!

Now our people, tell me:  
Should the people die for the leader  
Or the leader for the people?

In trickles, the Kanyamwa came back and congratulated Gor.  
When they met Gor carrying the old Chief Ong'ondo,  
They thought that Gor had already won the war



So they should come back and resume their former life.  
'Son of Ogada,' they said, 'please, be our chief.  
You've already transferred our problem to its rightful owner.'  
But Gor looked at them steadily and said,  
'I would rather be a slave than lead a corrupt people.  
You think the war is over? No!  
What you've experienced is the wind  
That heralds the thunderstorm.'

The thunderstorm did come and it uprooted the Kanyamwa.  
The Kwabwai army did come more determined than ever.  
The Kanyamwa fled past Gamba, past Ruri hills.  
The old chief was conveyed in a flight as speedy as lightning  
Until sensing that they had reached the edge of the territory,  
He ordered a halt, saying, 'Lay me down here!'  
Confused and ill, he asked, 'Where are we?'  
He was told they were in the lowlands.  
'So the swampland is near?'  
'Yes' was the reply.  
'Lay me down here!' repeated the old chief.  
'I am not going into the swarms of mosquitoes.  
Never! Never! Never!  
The territory ends here!  
Let me die here!'

Where the old man was laid became the boundary  
Between the Kanyamwa and the scanty lowlands people,  
Hence the place is called *Loo-ogik-k'Ong'ondo*  
From the chief's words, 'The territory ends here!'

The Kwabwai went to rest after a good day's work, saying,  
'We've only let out gas; we're yet to defecate.'  
They sent word to the Kanyamwa,  
'Tomorrow we shall come to push you into the Lake.  
We've heard there is a lot of fish there this season  
So, you shall thank us for putting you right in food!'

When the Kanyamwa heard the message,  
They wanted to retreat the more.  
But the old chief said,  
'Never! I shall die here!  
The territory has ended!'  
So the people of Kanyamwa erected shelters  
There where the chief refused to move.

There, they also buried their dead  
And mourned for them with a lot of bitterness.

Ong'ondo summoned Gor to a meeting  
And there he said, pointing at Gor,  
'This child here...what he said has come to pass  
And he's the true hero...  
He was ready to die for the land.  
Let him now lead this land.'

He took the royal stool and staff, saying,  
'This stool and staff, I give them to you, Gor.  
Lead the land.  
Let you try.'  
And everybody chorused back,  
'Let Gor try!'

Then the chief called Oyoko wuo' Nyabunde and said,  
'Oyoko, it is you who have got the sacrificial animals:  
You've got black goats with white spots on the heads.  
You've sheep with twins and cows with triplets.  
Whatever this lad asks for, give him  
And the glory of this land shall be restored.'  
Oyoko nodded in assent.

The elder agreed to work with 'the child.'  
But Gor was not a child;  
He was so only in the eyes of old men.  
He had married Awino, though belatedly,  
And had had no child with her.  
He had married other wives too  
And had children with them.

Gor had chosen the path of sacrificing for the land.  
He did not have a home yet;  
There was not even a destroyed hut in his name.  
So he stayed with the Oyokos  
In order to work best for the land.

There where Oyoko was instructed, Ong'ondo said solemnly,  
'The country that has no heroes will soon find one;  
But the country that has suppressed its heroes must fall.  
People of our homestead, let the true heroes rise, rise, rise.  
Then the land will also rise, rise, rise.

People of Kanyamwa, you have heroes among you here  
You have Gor, blessed by the ancestors, boosted by his wisdom;  
He has also proved himself by fighting a whole army alone.  
You have Siso Ngwara and Omusi Adem, the marksmen.  
You have Aduwo Bam and Otho k'Odul, the swordsmen.  
Let Gor lead them and they will save the land.  
People of Kanyamwa, bury the quacks deeply, deeply, deeply  
Because they are like *ombugu* weeds—  
Difficult to destroy, but sure to destroy the crops.  
Our people, remember the ancient saying  
That when you are through with your dance,  
You leave the arena for others to dance too.  
When we forget the past and its sayings  
Then we turn into ogres, foolish and greedy  
And bound to be destroyed by our own folly.'

He turned to Gor and in a solemn voice  
Recognized by people as that of a spirit, he said,  
'People of our land,  
Let this child restore wisdom to the land.  
Let this child restore heroism to this land.  
As for me, my time has come.  
Bury me here!'

Chief Ong'ondo died there at Loo-ogik  
From where he had refused to move  
Saying it was the end of the territory.  
There, a hut was built and a grave dug in it.  
And the old man was laid there to rest.  
That wilderness at Loo-ogik became his home and tomb.

## **The Wilderness is Terrible!**

'The wilderness is not our home!' said Gor  
As he emerged from the ramshackle hut of divination.  
The cranes in the swamps were singing joyously,  
The wild cocks crowed, and other birds testingly,  
As if unsure the night had ended, cried sporadically.  
For the son of Ogada, there had not been a night;  
Day and night merged as he worked to restore the lost land.  
The young warriors like Omusi Adem were expectant  
As they waited to start a new career,  
The old warriors like Ochieng' Ratego having fled for shame.  
The people were hopeful; and Gor was confident.

Gor said, 'Beyond this point, where the old chief has died,  
There will be no Kanyamwa.  
There will be no man or woman or child of Kanyamwa  
Only refugees to be drunk into the wombs of other peoples  
Or lost in the wilderness and the Lake.  
The territory ends here!'

When the golden sunrise hit Gor's eyes,  
The Black Mamba of the Escarpment struck the warriors  
With his bloodshot eyes and warned,  
'The wilderness is terrible!  
The Kwabwai army is coming to finish their job.  
But more terrible is the wilderness for them.  
We are not going to sacrifice humans  
So that we win a battle with in-laws.  
But winning we must.  
Ours is the army that wins!'

When the Kanyamwa army heard that,  
They danced for war.  
They chanted, 'We are the army that wins.'  
They said, 'We are ready to die  
If our blood be the price  
For the survival of the land,  
So be it!'  
They chanted,

*We are ready to die for the land;  
We are the army that wins.*

Gor took a ram and gave it to Langa saying,  
'Behold the Kwabwai are advancing;  
Go and meet them, scary though the mission is.  
Give them this ram so that it be our sacrifice.'

'I'm ready to die for the land!'

Ae Langa the warrior!  
He agreed to meet the enemy and risk death.  
The lone warrior set off to die for the land.  
When people are ready to give up their lives,  
To give up what they love most,  
Then the fruit of victory is born;  
The flower of life is blooming.

Gor turned to the rest and said,  
‘People of Ramba,  
The time has indeed come.  
You people of Wamo clan,  
Go to the east!  
You people of Kologi,  
Go to the west  
And you people of Kosewe,  
Hide in the grove to the north!  
Behold the enemy is advancing from the south  
And we shall be here to study them.  
Then when you hear the sound of the horn piercing the sky,  
Rise up and raise hullabaloo and advance on the enemy  
From left, right and centre, we shall attack.  
Today, the wilderness will mourn for the Kwabwai.’

Hardly had the people taken positions  
Than the Kwabwai raised the alarm to attack.  
They were boosted by their earlier successes.  
But the Kanyamwa were weighted down with grief.  
Not enough war dances had been danced;  
Not enough war songs had been sung.  
And Gor was in a rage:  
‘These our brothers and sisters,  
Can’t they even give us time to mourn?’  
He made as if to blow the war horn with madness  
But he didn’t, knowing his army’s strengths and weaknesses.  
The spears were still heavy in the hands of the warriors  
And the shields were weighing them down.  
They had spent the previous day and night  
Erecting shelters, digging graves and looking for food.  
And Gor knew that Langa’s ram had not been rustled.  
So he looked up at the sun  
The eye of the sun was red—  
A liquid ball of blood in the morning.  
The eyes of Gor were also red—  
Balls of fire in the morning.  
The son of Ogada winked and clouds blocked the sun  
And a great shadow descended on the land.  
Like a giant bird on a definite mission  
The clouds descended as with powerful wings  
And settled on the grasses, the hills, the valleys....

It was a cold and invisible morning  
That the Kwabwai met  
As fog enveloped the land.  
What a weather to fight in!  
The Kwabwai army hesitated  
Turned to Osumba Ojowi and cried,  
'If we walk like this into the hyaena's mouth;  
If we run like this into the beast's womb  
Shall we not be most foolish?'

Osumba Ojowi turned to Odhul Andhoga and said,  
'How is this weather of Kanyamwa behaving?  
Have you conspired with your people to bring it about?'  
Odhul kept silence.

Osumba Ojowi looked around and saw nothing but fog;  
He felt nothing but numbing coldness.  
'Ae Otuoma wuo' Matoro!' he exclaimed to his leader,  
'Shall we rush into the dark fangs of the Kanyamwa death?  
Oh chief, can't you speak?'

Otuoma was absorbed in the behaviour of his cowries,  
Frowning and puzzling at their movements.  
There was this one cowrie,  
Troublesome, lonely, but sober and commanding others.  
Then the cry came, only too late,  
'It's this wizard!  
This child who sojourned in my home—  
I always suspected him.  
Oh my people, what a good war to postpone!'

Victory had been clear to the Kwabwai  
Like the eye of the previous day's sun.  
But Gor had ended that clarity—  
Otuoma could not see clearly anymore.  
The fog was almost palpable  
And impenetrable like the *Ohinga* wall of Kanyamwa.

Ae Langa, the lone warrior who tends the magical ram!  
He had decided to walk into the mouth of the enemy  
So as to save the land.  
But he walked into Ochieng' Ratego and a few cronies  
Shivering in the cold and hungry.  
They immediately demanded for the ram

To be slaughtered and roasted 'to remove the cold'.  
Langa told them that he couldn't do that  
As he had an urgent mission to fulfil with the ram.  
As they were arguing, the Kwabwai bumped onto them.  
Amused and pleasantly surprised, they asked,  
'Is it this little thing that big men fight over?'  
And the big men were just the ones they wanted to capture.  
'We shall reconcile you,' they said as they grabbed the ram  
And huddled the Kanyamwa men under a tree,  
Beating them with spear-shafts.  
Killing the Kanyamwa captives  
Without torturing them would be too good.

Now the land was cold and hunger-causing  
And the ram suggested itself as a roasted, delicious meal.  
So the Kwabwai passed knives through its neck,  
Razors under its skin and axes through its bones.  
A bonfire as big as an anthill quickly blazed into life,  
The fats sizzled and the mutton changed colour.  
Perhaps the Kanyamwa men should be given a piece,  
Nay, give them the pieces so they can die happy.  
'With your ram in your stomachs, you won't quarrel again.  
Aha, Ratego of Kanyamwa, you're the biggest catch  
An army anywhere could make.  
With the ram in your stomach,  
Won't you wish for a light journey to the land of spirits?  
Aha Langa, whatever load has reached your stomach  
Is as light as your big head!'

As they teased the prisoners,  
The Kwabwai set upon the fat mutton  
Like hungry hyaenas, only pointing out the bones  
For Ratego and other captives to collect and 'feast upon'.  
'Don't worry,' the Kwabwai said, gobbling the mutton,  
'We'll leave the bones with some flesh on them.'  
Lo, they picked the poor bones clean!

Ratego could not stomach the greed and boastfulness.  
He and his cronies rose up to go,  
But were instantly speared to death.  
But Langa was more patient;  
He waited for the Kwabwai to kill him at their own time.

When the warriors had finished the meal, including the bones,

It was as though they had eaten boulders.  
They could not rise up;  
Their captive swaggered away in their very eyes.

Langa, the one who delivers a 'treated' ram to the enemy:  
He came back without a scratch of a spear  
Or a knife or an arrow on his body.  
He came and reported what had happened.  
And that is how Gor had planned it.

The Kwabwai knew how to fight,  
But only when Gor was not there.  
When Gor was there, Otuoma kept on saying,  
'This child! Why can't he play with his age-mates?  
I shall kill him without mercy.'  
But never did he kill any Kanyamwa man,  
For when the clouds took to wings again,  
Disappeared in the sky, azure and still,  
And the sun shone in every corner,  
The Kwabwai found themselves surrounded.

The Kosewe clan advanced from the front,  
The Wamo from the right and Kologi from the left.  
The war horn blew courage into the Kanyamwa warriors  
But its sound beat the Kwabwai warriors like clubs.  
Panic seized them as they saw  
That they were going to die in broad daylight.

Many were the Kwabwai warriors  
Who on that day in the dry season  
Drank the Kanyamwa spears...till Gor asked,  
'Don't you, Kwabwai warriors,  
Ever get satiated with meals of iron?'  
The remaining Kwabwai fled and hid like children;  
So rare were they that they had to be hunted  
Under boulders and abandoned shields,  
In holes and in tree foliage.

The flight took the Kwabwai to the Ruma Valley;  
In those days it was the Valley of Hyaenas.  
Here they had to contend with the sorcery of Oyamo Odidi  
And raids of ferocious beasts and man-eaters—  
Creatures that particularly liked the flesh of human children.



The land remained for us, our people;  
The land of Kanyamwa will ever be ours.  
So the people returned to their old homes  
And built them anew where they had been destroyed.  
So the people were happy  
For they could walk with their heads straight once again.

That man who delivered us from shame  
And those men and women who fought to restore peace—  
We still broadcast their names.  
Rattling, I recite the names of our heroes:  
Gor Mahia built the New Kanyamwa.  
Otho K'Odul and Omusi Adem,  
Siso Ngwara, Langa Jarombo and Aduwo Bam:  
All were the warriors who were ready to die.  
The elders like Oyoko wuo' Nyabunde,  
The women like Atoka nyar Jema and Awino ny'Obonyo,  
Gor's brothers and sisters, relatives and friends—  
We broadcast their names in daylight.  
All gave Gor support.  
For the land cannot be built by one man  
But by every individual starting from his heart.

Our people, if we had no heroes,  
Our land would have gone.  
If Gor was not there,  
Kanyamwa would be no more.

When Gor had thus restored the glory of the land  
And consolidated the power for building the land,  
He turned to his family  
And built it with all his strength and wisdom.  
He loved Awino so much that he would never part with her  
In his journeys or divinations.  
He also married more women  
And established a home on Sigama Hill  
Where the wayward warriors once met  
To create division in the land.  
Here at his home Gor worked to unify the people  
And to protect the land.  
Here, he also sired the future generation  
Like Oswago the Brave, Ogutu Raruoch the Giant,  
Nyamunga the Educated and Ogada Tonye.  
But Awino was not blessed with children:

For a long time, she was childless.  
Gor also took care of his old mother, Atoka;  
Daughter of the magicians, she was called,  
She who had protected Gor even in youth and in his reign;  
She died and was decently buried and mourned.

## War for Peace

Ojowi the war leader became the lead hunter.  
He went around in his goatskin clothes  
Threw himself down at Kwabwai gates,  
And bleated, mooed, brayed, trumpeted and roared.  
People came out and asked where the expedition would go  
And he always pointed at the wilderness in Ruma  
Until one day, he imitated the sound, not of a wild beast  
But of a crying, anguished human  
And people asked why and where.  
'Because I'm tired of carrying heads of animals;  
I want a more honourable trophy,' replied Ojowi.  
Then he pointed in the direction of Kanyamwa.  
Word spread that the Kwabwai hunters  
Would go for a hunting expedition near Kanyamwa.

On the eve of that expedition,  
Gor sat with fellow diviners and Awino ny'Obonyo.  
Blood from a black bull was bled into an earthen dish  
And brought before them.  
The son of Ogada took a flywhisk  
And whisked flies into the blood, saying,  
'All those flies in the blood  
Are the Kwabwai warriors who will be killed tomorrow?'  
And he whisked more flies into the blood  
Till he became mad whisking all the flies into the dish.

Awino ny'Obonyo raised her voice hard, saying,  
'Stop it son of Ogada! Stop it!  
All this slaughter will destroy your family.  
Please, stop it!'

Then Gor sobered up and said,  
'All right my wife,  
If you say so, I shall stop it.'  
And he ended the divination there.

The next day the Kwabwai came and were routed.

And Gor desired to join in the battle with his spears  
So he inspected the battlefield, but it was deserted.  
Then he saw an abandoned buffalo-hide shield.  
He approached it but cautiously:  
Even shields could grow legs and thrust spears.  
The shield indeed sprung into action  
And performed a war dance  
As vigorous as the dance of a crazy elephant!  
It was a giant Kwabwai man who attacked Gor.

How could the warrior play with Gor?  
Gor pitied his attacker: it was futile  
To show a big body to the Lion of the Escarpment.  
Gor swept the man clean off the ground,  
Placed him on his back with the spear pointing at his heart.  
Curious to know him before he died, Gor asked,  
'Man, were you brought here to fight or to dance?'

The man recognized Gor and counted himself unlucky.  
He knew Gor was no ordinary warrior  
And that his (the warrior's) power despite being that of a giant  
Was like that of a pebble hurled against a mountain.  
So he broke down and cried like a child,  
'Son of Ogada, spare my life.  
I'm Ojwang', a brother to many girls.  
Spare my life and I'll present you with a woman.'  
Then Gor realized that the Kwabwai were in-laws  
And it would not be wise to finish them.  
He told the warriors who had gathered around  
To pass on and recall their fellows  
For the war was over.

'Don't you kill the Kwabwai a lot.  
Their daughters are our wives  
And our daughters their wives  
We do not want grief in our land.'  
When the warriors had passed on,  
Gor told Ojwang' to flee.  
But he looked long at Gor and said,  
'Son of Ogada, your mercy is beyond explanation.'

This man Ojwang' went away with his life  
And a story which took him the rest of his life to relate.  
'Today, I've really examined Gor,' boasted Ojwang'

Surrounded by a keen Kwabwai audience.  
'Gor wears leopard skin dress and cowhide sandals,  
Dons a monkey-skin headgear,  
Carries a flywhisk with him  
And is accompanied by a dog.  
Gor is tall and dark, but in his mouth he has scarce teeth.  
Our people, Gor is really toothless!'  
The man became famous as Ojwang' Kanoni,  
The curious one who examined Gor's gums.  
And he boasted of how he knew to trick Gor,  
'Just tell him you'll give him a girl  
And he will sell you the whole world.'

When Gor learned that Ojwang' had gained the reputation  
As Kanoni, The Examiner of Gor's Toothless Gums,  
He said Ojwang' would eat and fight no more.  
Gor Okumu, the Mysterious one:  
He acquired Ojwang's *ataka* loincloth  
Treated it with magic and the Kwabwai warrior ceased to be.  
One day as he was narrating his great story,  
He found himself prostrate on the ground  
Beseeching the invisible Gor to spare his life once more.  
But never was his life spared.  
The others learnt that the mysteries of Gor k'Ogada  
Should never be revealed without his permission

The next battle which Ojwang' Kanoni didn't live to see  
Was fought because Otuoma had not yet believed  
That his people could be the ones to stay in the wilderness,  
Contending for space with a sorcerer and man-eaters.  
Many a Kwabwai child had been dragged into the lairs  
To serve as reserve meals for the beasts.

Otuoma cut sticks and counted them:  
They were more than the population of Kanyamwa  
The born and the unborn.  
He said, 'All these sticks  
Are the Kanyamwa who must die in our hands.  
Let the blame be off my hands  
For we too must exist!'

Gor saw Otuoma's schemes clearly  
In the intestines of Oyoko's freak goat.  
Laughter came to him in spasms and he said,

‘Otuoma has now overreached himself  
By desiring to kill us all.’  
Then he sent spies who went to the Valley of Hyaenas  
And filched all of Otuoma’s sticks.  
Gor neutralized Otuoma’s spell and said,  
‘Now it will be the Kwabwai warriors to die!’  
The Kwabwai sticks were turned against them.  
What a horror to die by your own hand?

To plot against Gor was to commit suicide  
As Otuoma saw in the movements of his cowries.  
But the Kwabwai magician tautened his muscles to win;  
He tensed his muscles to beat the Kanyamwa.  
But didn’t he also tense his buttocks  
To stop the gas from his stomach?  
Aha, the Kwabwai magicians stomach  
Was being churned by fear  
Like the milk-gourd in the hands of an experienced woman.  
He changed the style of his divination  
From the use of cowries to the use of animals.  
He knew Gor used animals in divination  
And so claimed victories which he thought should be his.  
So he ran around, grabbed a goat and slaughtered it.  
He wanted to be like Gor  
But can the old be like the young?  
People warned, ‘Oh son of Matoro,  
You’re probably going mental!’

When Gor saw that Otuoma was tautening his buttocks,  
He employed people to laugh at him  
For his laughter alone was inadequate for Otuoma’s folly.  
Then the laughter filled Kanyamwa  
And reached Otuoma at his Valley of Hyaenas hide-out.

There in his hut, Otuoma was enraged,  
‘What child becomes a chief overnight?  
Now, he has turned all of them into children:  
Who but a child laughs with his own death?’  
He went on killing animals in order to defeat the Kanyamwa.

People asked, ‘How can an old man  
Imitate the ways of the young?’  
But the old man kept on saying,  
‘I too want to exist.’

He killed animals of all colours and of all mixtures of colours  
(Thirty animals of thirty colours in all)  
In order to stumble upon the formula to counter Gor's magic.  
To him Gor was a man who had built a wall around his home  
And made so many gates, but only one of which he would use.

So Otuoma saw himself as the enemy in ambush,  
Looking for the right gate Gor would use  
In coming out to his death.

'Where is his gate?' he would mutter  
As he killed one animal after another.  
'Where is his path?' he would ask  
As he depleted the Kwabwai livestock.  
'Which side is his gate?' he would ask  
As he distributed meat to the people.

In those days meat was plenty in Kwabwai;  
Fat were the warriors, the dogs and hyaenas.  
It was good the hyaenas were satiated  
For they would not bother with the children.  
And the dogs? It was good the dogs were satiated  
For they would not grudge the warriors their food.  
And the warriors? It was good the warriors were satiated  
For they would not grudge us our land.

In those days Otuoma got the reputation  
As 'the depleter of the Kwabwai livestock.'  
'For what is he fighting?' became the question.  
Can a people be satisfied with land only,  
Without the animals to grace it?  
Such land is barren that lacks any of the big cooking stones:  
Man, plant or animal.  
The three were created to be together  
And if one wants to annihilate another  
That is a sign of madness such as can bring the sun down.  
Such madness must be stopped.

So Gor sympathised with the Kwabwai animals  
And resolved to stop the Otuoma madness.  
On the eve of the battle, he didn't kill any animal.  
At dawn, he bid the warriors run fast through a bonfire  
Then jump from roof to roof and perform the war dance.  
He distributed the Kwabwai sticks among them and then said,  
'*Ae tho!* Go to war!'

How much better can a chief prepare his warriors?

On that day, the eye of the sun turned golden  
As the Kwabwai warriors were killed to a man.  
Night came when the Kwabwai warriors were no more  
And Otuoma was in the mood of a mother  
Mourning the last of her children,  
For his divination sticks had gone,  
His animals had been depleted and now...  
Now the warriors were no more.

Being not given to singing, Otuoma burst out into a croak:

*Some men fight and return home  
But mine fight and fall silent.  
Oh my warriors sleep  
Sleep that you may wake up strong.*

The warriors slept and petrified.  
Those bodies that were eaten by vultures in the bush  
Were Gor Mahia's victims.  
And Gor Mahia desired to mourn them,  
Those sons of the land turned against it;  
He desired to visit his former host Otuoma  
And share with him the sorrows that afflict mankind.

Gor set out for Ruma.  
The journey took him through the Kor Lang'o Path,  
Through singing grasses, dancing bushes,  
Roaring rivers and cooking mountains....  
Till he reached Ruma in the evening  
And made for the Valley of Hyaenas.

The wood-pecker tapped on the woods;  
The round-headed owl let out an eerie sound.  
Once in the Valley, the hyaenas coughed, laughed and cried.  
Then Gor knew that the place was dangerous;  
That he was not wanted there.  
So he reached Otuoma's place like lightning,  
Talked with him like a friend and relative,  
Entered his hut and pulled off the pillar from its centre  
And carried it away on his shoulders.  
The pillar was long and strong,  
A pillar taken from the rare *kang'o* forests.

Always carried to wherever Otuoma erected a new home,  
It looked too new and strong for its age.

Gor was crossing a river when he said  
To his step-sister who had been at the river,  
'Tell the father of Matoro that I've taken his pillar.'  
A pot perched like a bird on her head;  
Wonder overwhelmed her like a powerful drug.  
How had her brother pulled out the pillar from its roots?  
The pillar would require many men to put in the ground  
And many more to pull it up and carry it away?  
If those were the questions of a daughter of Kanyamwa,  
How many more would a non-Kanyamwa person ask?  
'Tell the father of Matoro that the person he was talking to  
Was none other than Gor!' Gor said.

As he set off for Kanyamwa, Ruma was in confusion.  
Oyamo Odidi who thought the whole Ruma was his domain  
Was not happy with the intrusion. He was furious.  
'How can Gor come here  
And wiggle his buttocks away  
Without raising his eyes to see me?'

People, it is bad for an old man to have worries.  
Otuoma was rendered speechless when he learnt the truth  
About the visit in which he had been deceived.  
After some time, he said, 'I thought it was Ojowi  
Who came to visit me to plan the next battle.  
But if it was this child Gor,  
I only ask this one question:  
Where were the warriors when he stepped into this valley?'

The worried old man of Kwabwai was enraged  
So that he ordered quite a few people to be killed  
And among those killed was Odhul Andhoga  
Who the Kwabwai said had betrayed them,  
And was seeking to rule them.  
Our people, is it not in the nature of the power-holders  
To eliminate as soon as they have used?  
Beware kinsmen, beware the power-holders!

The worried old man of Kwabwai was struck by rheumatism  
So that he could not walk anymore.  
The agile Kwabwai magician was rooted in his decrepit hut



Till he cried out, 'Ae Gor son of Ogada,  
Let me also exist!  
I was also born of a woman like you.'  
Otuoma sent women to relay this message to Gor  
And relay the cry and misery of the Kwabwai too.

## Putting the Crumbs Together

When Gor had listened to Otuoma's messengers  
He asked them questions one by one  
To which they were required to answer 'yes' or 'no'.  
'Did I hear you say that the Kwabwai magician  
Is as immobile as a boulder on the plains?'  
'Yes,' was the reply.  
'Did I hear you say that Otuoma wuo' Matoro  
Is as lonely as the same boulder on the plains?'  
'Yes,' was the reply.  
'Was it my ear I heard say  
That war is no longer in my in-law's plans?'  
The reply, 'No, we said so.'  
'Was it my ear I heard say  
That our in-law is tired?'  
The reply, 'No, we said so.'  
'Was it Otuoma who said I should let him exist?'  
'Yes,' was the reply.

After those five questions, Gor summoned the elders  
Talked with them for long and then said,  
'As our ancestors used to do, so let us do.  
We have lived side by side and together  
With hostile humans, animals and other creatures.  
We lived with man-eaters whom we turned into vegetarians;  
We lived with man-hunters whom we turned into protectors;  
We lived with enemies whom we turned into friends  
And we lived with foreigners  
Whom we turned into ourselves in blood and spirit.'

Gor called Otuoma to Ratang'a  
Where elders from Kanyamwa and Kwabwai met.  
There at Ratang'a Gor talked to the elders,  
'We the grandsons of Teful and Ramogi  
Have never been known to bear or pay off grudges.  
We belong to the lineage of great men;  
We belong to the winning army  
And so we go to war only to restore justice

And to fight for peace and glory.  
Pointing at Otuoma, Gor said,  
‘This is not the Kwabwai man who waged war against us.  
This is our son-in-law who has returned to follow the word.  
The word is the seed we store for planting in the next season.  
The word says that the descendants of Chwanya  
Shall never be enemies with the descendants of Bwai.  
We the descendants of Nyamwa, daughter of foreigners,  
Are the carriers of the word.  
The word clears the stormy weather  
Between our neighbours and us.  
We the Kanyamwa are the custodians of the Mother Pot  
From which all the pieces broke.  
If the pieces now come together to attach themselves to us  
Do we turn them away?  
We want the pot to be whole again  
So that it can carry water for life.’

Gor was the expert on the past  
And the store of all the present knowledge.  
Used to pushing their sons into battlefields,  
And watching the slaughter in glee,  
The elders were not happy with this coming together  
To the elders, Gor told a story,  
‘Once upon a time, we were one whole pot  
Held neatly and tightly together.  
The leaders held this pot carefully,  
Agitated the milk inside till it brought out cream and butter  
And food was cooked and eaten.  
In the hands of good leaders,  
Life was milk, cream and butter.  
In the hands of bad leaders,  
The pot was hit hard against a rocky ground  
And it broke into pieces.  
Then the milk spilled and there was no more cream or butter.  
Life was so difficult people preferred death.  
The cry was for the wise handlers of the calabash:  
“Oh where is Teful the Founder?  
Where is Ramogi the Brave?  
Where is Jok the saviour of Bwai?  
Where is Chwanya the Fork,  
Where is Obunga, the brother of Ologi?  
Where is Ogalo the Crumbs?”’

At this juncture, Gor paused  
Because there were no more heroes to be counted.  
Looking at the elders, he saw them shake their heads  
Dejected in the memory of the great forebears.  
Gor resumed his speech,  
'The ancestors have been sucked into the stomach of the earth.  
They were once like you and me  
With blood flowing within their veins  
And words forming in their mouths.  
Now their bones are buried, but their words are kept.  
Where are our own words?  
What words will be said about us?  
Ae my people, the earth's stomach is large!  
Even we shall not be enough to fill it.  
We shall be sucked deep,  
Deep into the intestines of the earth.'

In a thoughtful mood, the elders decided  
That they would not be the ones to be lost  
In the large intestines of the earth:  
Their words and words about them  
Must be left behind for posterity.  
That is why they said they must do something.  
That is why they agreed to work with Gor  
In whatever he was doing.  
They urged Gor to go on.

'All the crumbs must come together.  
This is the word:  
All the crumbs must unite in order to exist.  
When a crumb fell on Jok, he became so strong.  
Bwai was the crumb that was so wise  
It fell on our great ancestor.  
In those days of yore,  
Pandemonium broke loose in the Land of Bananas.  
So Bwai saw the wisdom to leave the war  
And live with Jok in peace.  
And our ancestress, Awando, welcomed Bwai  
As though he was a prodigal son returned to the fold.  
This our grandmother also brought up Owila of Uyoma;  
She also brought up Rachuonyo, Wanjare and Chwanya—  
Those were her three sons.  
So in total, Awando cared for six men!  
How industrious and generous she was!

Under one roof, our ancestors were brought up in peace.  
Even when that calamity of patricide befell us,  
We remained united except for the killer who fled.  
Where was war in this scheme of things?  
This is the word:  
The crumbs must make peace even after a bitter war.'

A dog barked and it was caught;  
At the border near Ratang'a,  
The dog was cut into two and buried  
To signify peace, to bewitch war mongers  
And to ensure kinship continued  
Among all the denizens of Milambo.

It was Gor who let the Kwabwai be where they are today:  
Between our kinsmen, the Karungu, and us.  
Gor decided we stay side by side  
So that the in-laws may do their things on one side  
As we do ours on our side.  
And Ratang'a became our border of peace and plenty,  
And Gor became our Chief of peace and plenty.  
And we intermarried so much we became one people.  
The peace was celebrated in the Kwabwai highlands,  
The Kanyamwa escarpment and plains.  
The war horns went silent and the spears pointed upwards  
As people sang *agoro* victory songs.

Praises were to the grandson of Ogalo  
Who saved the Kanyamwa from death  
And prevented others from smearing them with blood.  
Never had it been known that the descendants of a woman  
Loved to spill blood for a playful cause.  
Nyar-Mwa was the eponymous ancestress  
Married by foreigners to the Luos  
To establish peace everlasting  
Between the two hostile communities.  
That is why in Luoland, nobody is a foreigner  
Even though the origins are as different  
As the origins of cats and goats.

And now people of our homestead,  
We leave the Kwabwai alone  
To tauten their buttocks for building their land—  
They are a hardworking people

Coaxing wealth out of the soil we gave them.  
Let them prosper.

Let's now focus on Kanyamwa  
Where the breaking of the mother pot  
Ensured we remained less populous,  
But happily with the seeker and founder of the word.

# SEASON TWO

## The Aborted Foetus

The word came out of the goat's stomach,  
Loomed so large it cried for attention.  
It was a foetus impatient to be delivered.

Gor was transfixed,  
Transported into the world of the goat's stomach  
So Awino beside him felt lonely,  
Lonely like Awando on the plains.  
She touched his back and said,  
'Son of my father-in-law ae!  
Your enemy will one day descend upon you  
Without your detecting it.  
How can a whole chief  
Be lost in the intestines of a goat?'

Gor laughed that laughter of his  
Which filled the whole earth;  
He looked at his beautiful wife.  
'Lost!' he wondered.  
'Grandson to Ogalo can never be lost!!  
Behold the enemy is coming now  
And not even those who have eyes raised notice him.  
Behold the enemy is plodding on  
And a foetus is crying to be born.'  
Playfully, Gor looked at Awino's womb and said,  
'Can you deliver it?'

Awino was embarrassed  
For she was only three months pregnant  
And thought her husband was making a bad joke.  
'Ae son of Ogada, keep silence  
For the witches may hear you  
And kill our baby before it is born.  
Wait and a child shall be born.'

'Wait?' said the Magician studying his own mind.  
'The foetus is crying to be born now!  
The delivery must be now  
By the elder-attendants!

Behold the enemy is coming  
And the word is our weapon.'

Awino understood  
She was in the presence of Mahia  
And listening to a magician's jargons.  
But she wanted to talk to her husband,  
'Ae Okumu, our baby shall be born.  
Now the work is mine  
But soon it will be upon us to bring it up.  
A baby will soon be born to us.'

'The hyaenas are here with us,' said Gor.  
'The beasts might snatch and devour us!'

'Ae my husband!  
Why talk to me in terrible proverbs?  
Is there such a calamity coming our way  
That you must hide it in words?'

'Our baby is alright,' said Gor.  
'Only the black man's foetus of unity is endangered.  
Can it be born is the question.  
A swarm of human beings  
More ravenous than locusts  
Are set to invade our land.  
I must deliver the word to the elders everywhere.  
Our baby is safe.  
But the swarms are coming.  
Swarms worse than caterpillars  
Hanker for our flesh, bones and heart  
But the black man cannot unite  
To fight the swarms of destruction.  
The fight is beyond one man, one land, and one chiefdom.  
If the fight is left for one person,  
It had better not be fought at all.'

'Man by my side,' said Awino.  
'You don't need so many words  
To tell me that cannibals are coming:  
Cannibals who like bones, flesh and hearts of men.  
Perhaps they spare wombs and stomachs  
In which case our baby will survive.'

'Women, women!' said Gor  
'Women with words are dangerous!  
You've forced me to say it:  
Our land is soon to be invaded  
By baby-like creatures  
Who've fire in sticks.  
It's fire, oh!  
This fire will burn our life  
Not even water will extinguish it;  
Only the word can extinguish it.'

Gor set out to deliver the word of unity  
To all the leaders and magicians around the Lake.  
The journey took him far:  
It took him years to accomplish.  
But no one magician or leader accepted the word.  
'These invaders will finish us one by one  
If one by one we meet them,' Gor said.

Odera Ulalo of Gem said his magic was great:  
It would either drive away the invaders  
Or weaken them for the day of slaughter.  
And he hated the son of Ogada with his body and magic.  
He could smell an opponent in this grandson to Ogalo.  
Onyando of Kisumu did not bother to listen;  
He advised Gor to stay with him as a guest  
For his granaries were 'full of food  
And pens full of cattle  
And small huts full of goats and sheep  
So hundreds of guests, even overstaying ones  
Could not deplete this wealth.'

In Kano, Kitoto wuon Chama said,  
'The word came to me much earlier  
And I've advised my people to abandon practices  
That set them apart from other Luos.  
I've made them a whole people  
Belonging to one whole community.  
But here in Kano we are  
And there in Kanyamwa you are.  
Whatever calamity befalls us is ours;  
Whatever calamity befalls you is yours.'

Gor came to Kere of Nyakach



Who said his army was fit  
To defend all the Lake people  
From marauding animals, insects or men.  
They had cowed all the jo-Lang'o peoples  
With the aid of nobody but themselves  
And Omieri was their revered ancestress  
Pouring forth rain every season  
And visiting them in the form of a snake  
Whenever there was need in the land.

When Gor arrived in Karachuonyo  
Nyakiti k'Ogutu exclaimed,  
'My playmate is back!'  
He welcomed him into his home  
Excused himself to fetch a bull for slaughtering  
But then caused a forest to surround the home,  
A forest infested with lions, leopards, *nyalhuu* flying snakes—  
All the wild animals made noise  
Threatening to storm in and kill Gor.  
Gor said, 'Ai, what a host!'  
Turned into a bird, a giant hornbill,  
And flew away.

Nyakiti was pleased with himself  
Thinking he had had his sweet revenge.  
He invited his people to celebrate his victory  
By watching Gor surrounded by a magical forest,  
'Today, I've really beaten Gor,' he boasted to his people.  
'This Kanyamwa man came to my home  
And I besieged him with the Mt. Huma Forest!'  
But the people doubted him  
For they did not see Gor.  
What a misfortune  
For a magician to be doubted!

Kasuku, ah!  
Kasuku said the land of the Wagasi  
Was peaceful and fertile;  
The Gwasssi Hills were lush and green  
The Lake was sparkling silver and blue  
The people were beautiful and peaceful  
And there were no more Nyamgondho incidents.  
The foetus was being aborted torturously.

# Ougo's Word

But Gor did not despair.

He sailed on along the Lake from Gwassii

Till he reached Sori,

The beach of the Karungu people.

The Kanyamwa, Karungu, Kadem and Kabuoch

Are the descendants of Chwanya the Fork;

They are so close they don't intermarry;

So close they warn one another of danger.

When Gor reached Karungu, he was at home again

So he announced quickly:

'Word—o!'

The Karungu promptly gathered

To hear from the famous kinsman.

Gor said to the large gathering,

'The word that we were one calabash

Crashed to pieces

Has been rejected by other people.

The word that the fragments

Must join together again

Has also been rejected by those people.

But you, descendants of Chwanya, listen!

A swarm of baby-like creatures are advancing on us.

Other people have fought them in fragments

And been utterly, utterly destroyed.

Our ancestors said:

"We have wise counsellors

Who say: 'We shall not fight

When we are only a fragment of a whole.'

Our ancestors said:

"If other people are not going to join hands

We shall not fight at first."

Let us make peace first

Then, when we'll have studied the enemies,

Like goats' insides,

We shall drive them away.

Let us learn the ways and origins of these invaders first

For they have sticks

And in those sticks is fire

And that fire feeds on blood!'

Caught in their heroic time,

The Karungu were in no mood of listening

To a tale in which there was no war.  
There were more men than women in Karungu  
And this was a bad omen.  
But to every denizen of Sori,  
Karungu was a land of the braves  
And not even the Nyametho,  
The comet that smokes pipe,  
Would destroy it if it fell from the sky  
For the buffalo-hide shields held by the strong men  
Would stop it from falling.

Ougo was the bravest of the Karungu braves  
The Osumba Mirwayi who had seen victories  
Like the Sori beach sees waves.  
A praise singer escorted him to the front,  
'Behold, the bravest of the Karungu braves,  
The war leader who is bored with the puny human wars!  
Behold Ougo Ratego, the wrestler with beasts!  
The strong one is so huge the elephants tremble  
When they are invited to a wrestling match with him!  
With a spear in his right hand Ougo said,  
'Our kinsman has done well  
To warn us of the terrible creatures.  
But he should have waited for them to arrive  
And then call us for war.  
This is no land of cowards;  
This is no land of peace  
For baby invaders or giant invaders.  
Look at the herds of cattle, goats, sheep—  
They are all ours and our children's.  
Look at the trees, the animals, the birds.  
They are ours though they be wild.  
We are not going to yield  
To swarms of babies or plagues of diseases.  
When we came here from Kanyamwa  
We found a great wilderness  
But now we have inherited that wilderness.  
You know, kinsman,  
How we fought spear-toothed crocodiles in our Lake.  
You know how we eliminated the fierce *lukwata*,  
Those beasts with small heads, but big necks and bodies  
That would disappear with us into the womb of the Lake.  
You know how we fought fierce human-like creatures  
And plucked them off from this land

Like leech off the skin of the Lake swimmer.  
Relax, kinsman.  
We have tamed more weird creatures.  
If the babies do come  
We shall rock them to sleep  
With spears if need be.  
I, Osumba Ougo Ratego, have spoken.  
That is my word.'

The waves roared at Sori Bay,  
The Lake turned murky  
And the lake vulture sailed above  
Looking for its next victim.  
Ougo roared like thunder introducing a storm  
And the people were silent and transfixed  
Like under a mysterious charm.  
But not so Gor Mahia  
Who had witnessed many people  
Being turned into zombies by words.  
He also knew the end result of bravado  
Right from the days of Rabala's brothers  
Who spent more time praising themselves  
Than rescuing people, their father included.  
He also knew the Ratego spirit  
That had been the undoing of Kanyamwa.  
Were the descendants of Chwanya  
Destined to die by the Ratego spirit?

Gor left the Karungu preparing for war  
For they took Gor's prophecy to be without question.  
Such were the war dances, songs of praises...

To ensure there was no bad blood between kinsmen,  
Ougo gave out cattle to Gor  
Who in turn distributed them to poor people  
In the *riembo* loaning tradition.  
The poor people took care of the cows like babies  
And when the time came to return them to the owner  
Had enough calves to start their own herds.  
And Gor encouraged the rich to do as he had done  
So as to eliminate poverty—  
Poverty in those days meant possessing no animal—  
Then there would be no bachelors  
Or bachelor ghosts of those who die without marrying

For lack of bridewealth.  
Such ghosts were furious and vengeful.  
Gor said, 'What is poverty, people of our land?  
It is that which makes the skull empty  
And the poor man has no power to think clearly.  
He wakes up in the morning, but does not say,  
"Let the sun rise well for me,"  
Because all his days are bad days  
And he wants to be more poor  
So that he can say, "It is because..."  
And he is the agent of disease  
And he is the agent of death.  
People, beware: poverty is bad.'

So even as he went around looking for unity  
Son of Ogada did not forget other problems.  
He went round the country, even to Tanganyika  
Urging people to fight as one  
Or surrender as fragments.  
But everywhere he went,  
People said they would fight as of old  
Or surrender in whole.  
Our people, Gor tried  
But only the *nyatiti* singers appreciated him.  
They sang as they encircled homesteads:

*Gor goes round the earth  
Like the nyange wooden wheel.  
Gor wanders across the earth  
Like the goche wild-cats.  
If a chief leaves his home, there's some word to deliver.  
Some people erroneously say he wants power  
But Ogalo's grandson is only fighting for unity,  
So that when the enemy comes, we may fight to win.*

Gor said, 'The giant fowl  
Cannot eat a basketful of whole, compact *kuon* ;  
It can only eat a basketful of *kuon* in fragments.  
The giant cannot hurl a *dak* pot at a bird  
But he will break the pot and use the potsherd to kill the bird.'

Fellow leaders denied they were fragments or potsherds;  
Some said Gor Mahia wanted to rule them,  
That there was no truth in the prophecy,

That no pink baby ever walked on earth  
And carried a stick, let alone one with fire,  
That Gor was a liar like the proverbial Opuk Aswayo  
And that they would anyway fight off baby-like creatures  
If ever they came.

So Gor came back to Kanyamwa;  
He came back to his wife, Awino ny'Obonyo and said,  
'Daughter of the elder, our baby will be born  
But the foetus which came out of the goat's stomach  
Has been cruelly aborted  
And it will haunt us forever.'  
But even as he talked, he doubted his own words  
For he never believed in the death of the foetus.  
He was always on the move spreading the word.

The baby was born and it was a girl;  
She was named Awando after the great ancestress.  
Gor and Awino had hope in her because as a woman,  
She would balance out the belligerence  
And prevent the destruction of the land by the Ratego spirit  
Which advertised its destruction in a gleam.

Awino gave birth to girls only  
And until death  
She was inseparable from her husband.

## **Here Comes the Lord!**

Aha! When the prophet doesn't like his prophecy  
Things have reached the sunset.  
The creatures did come:  
They reached the land of Mumia Wanga  
And encroached on Luoland.  
Gor went to Wanga's and saw the white man at work;  
He watched the Ugenya Kager fighting the white man  
To show that they were braves, not dumb men.  
But no fragment could block the path of fire.

Gor summoned the Kanyamwa people:  
Here was Aduwo Bam; here was Langa;  
Here was Oyoko wuo' Nyabunde and other elders.  
Here was Siso Ngwara; here was Omusi Adem;  
Here was Otho k'Odul and other war leaders.  
Here was Awino and daughters of other lands.

When they had sat down Gor said,  
'The thing is like this:  
We are being forced to climb trees like monkeys—  
How we hate it!  
But we will go through a hundred years  
Of being monkeys. At the treetop,  
Visibility is better, but you're still a monkey.  
Yes, we'll soon reach the last branches  
And must choose which one to perch on.  
What does the voice of the land say?'

There were several voices,  
But the most strident were those of the braves.  
'War is in our blood,' they said.  
'We are heirs to great warriors and wise men.  
With our strength, oh Mahia!  
And with your wisdom and power  
We lack nothing to make us wipe out the babies.  
It will be a bad story indeed  
That with great warriors and a magician  
We were the ones who feared baby creatures.'

The women broke into ululation  
Offered to form the Nyikuodi Regiment  
To fight alongside the men's Jokuodi Army.  
Our people, you know the youth—their blood races.  
And the women were in love with their men.  
So Gor talked to the elders  
Who would in turn talk to their sons  
And to the women who would in turn talk to their lovers  
And to the warriors who would urge their right hands  
To drop spears and clubs.

Our people, this land has hosted multitudes.  
This land of the black man has seen things.  
Strange men camped in this land of Jo-Luo:  
There were a few white men  
Wielding guns, wearing helmets and khaki suits,  
They were giving command to their army.

And their army were a host of black men—  
Blacker than our blackest.  
They wielded fiery sticks  
Laughing with nobody

Except themselves and their masters.  
Their language was that of abuse  
And their favourite word and god was 'Gun.'  
'Gun,' they said folding their sticks,  
'Can finish all people, all animals in a day  
Not like spear which is child-stick.  
Gun burns spear like lightning.  
Spear useless; our babies play with,  
Our women cook food with.  
The shield is dry leaf to us  
We crush, crush and put Africans in it  
And crush, crush, crush till they cry.  
What is Shield and Spear for?  
Use Shield as umbrella to block rain and sun  
Use Spear as umbrella handle  
But not against Gun.  
Gun sets everything and everybody on fire.'

These swarms of boasters ate like locusts,  
Only they ate big game and farms of crops:  
Bulls of bulls, billy goats of billy goats,  
Rams of rams, granaries of grains.  
They had the habit of witches, plunderers and thieves.  
The Luos nicknamed them the *Okoche*  
And the *Okoche* introduced their white master  
As the *Bwana* , the Lord of all the living and the unborn.

When the white man finally reached Kanyamwa,  
Not a spear or a shield or club was raised against him.  
Our people did not fight a fight they had not trained for;  
A fight which the chief had nipped in the bud.  
Then the white man called Charles Hobley  
Nicknamed Obilo ka Nyobilo to suit our tongue  
Was nonplussed. 'I can't understand it!  
I just can't understand it!' he said.  
I, Charles Hobley, have traversed this goddamn continent,  
But nowhere have I seen this!  
Don't wild animals attack  
When their territories you invade?'  
He peered into every face for any signs.

'Who's your king?' he asked  
As the interpreter, the owner of meaning, took over,  
'Who is your big man?



The man who can at his will help himself to your wives  
And if he likes end your lives.'  
Everywhere they asked this question,  
Every finger pointed at Ogalo's place  
And every mouth spoke of Ogalo's grandson,  
Though they said he was not the big man they sought,  
The wife snatcher or murderer,  
Or the small man they thought he would be,  
A servant of their lord;  
He was simply the *ruoth* ,  
The leader, the protector and the light.

Then the commanding white man went to Sigama Hill.  
He was marching and singing to the steps of his army.  
His khaki uniform was shabby  
From too much mud and dust raised in wars;  
His gun was smoking and cocked;  
Ghosts whose lives he had ended were trailing him.

Seeing that there was peace in Kanyamwa,  
The white man put down his gun and wrote in his journal,  
'I had to trudge up that large hill on an escarpment;  
Sigama it was called—what a commanding view!  
The valley below and the Lake beyond!  
I was interested in a respected chief in the jungle  
Who presided over what looked to be a dynasty—  
A dynasty is quite unique in this part of the world.  
When I reached him, I saw a tall, black man,  
Composed and welcoming.'

'Are you Gore?' Hopley asked.

'Yes,' was the reply.

He camped at Gor's.  
Gor was in his royal regalia:  
A monkey-skin headgear,  
A leopard-skin dress and sandals.  
A flywhisk made of wildebeest tail  
And the chiefly staff and stool  
Were like his weapons.  
His blackness was shining;  
His eyes were shining.

The white man was welcomed with a party:  
Meat, milk, milky fish and milky gruel were in plenty;  
War dances, the art of eloquence and songs  
Replaced the war that would have been fought.

The white man was awestruck,  
His body rocking to the throb of the mother drum,  
His head nodding to the fearsome trumpeting of kudu horns...  
The black bodies surrounded him,  
Provoking him with all kinds of choreographic art...  
It was a sight to behold.

Hobley took out a book and pen  
And said he wanted to know about Gor  
And about his people who lived then and before.  
And Gor said he would also tell him  
About those who were yet to be born.  
The white man wondered  
Whether he was in converse with a prophet too  
And concluded, 'A big man is everything here:  
A tyrant and a leader,  
Liar and prophet, killer and healer.  
This one looks like a curious specimen.'

## Right Hand and Loincloth

When this white guest had been served food  
And the *Okoche* had been escorted far into the bush,  
Gor said,  
'In the beginning, there was only one homestead—  
The homestead of Jarateng' the Black,  
The ancestor of all men and women.  
People were born there, but instead of sticking together  
Like the pot that holds milk,  
They went their ways:  
North, south, east, west.  
Some said they were strong enough;  
Others said they were wise enough;  
Others said they were populous enough;  
And others said they were wealthy enough.  
Aha, can a fragment claim it has enough?

'There was a son of Jarateng'; Luo was his name.  
He fathered two sons; hot blood raced in their veins.  
One was called Arua and the other, Teful.

Arua liked beads; oh how we like things that dazzle!  
Teful's child swallowed Arua's bead  
And Arua split the child's stomach to retrieve the bead.

'The child died because of the bead.  
The love of bead and death of child split us.  
Then Arua took Teful's spiritual spear,  
Aimed it at a marauding elephant  
And the elephant majestically walked away with it.  
The love of bead, the death of child  
And now the loss of a spiritual spear!  
We could no longer stay together;  
We of Teful's lineage came down,  
Looking for a place in the South.  
We followed the Great Aora River,  
Passed through the Land of Bananas  
And reached the Great Nam Ataro.  
And crossed it to explore further.

'Our great ancestor on this side of Nam Ataro  
Welcomed people to stay with him.  
Jok welcomed all guests that came along  
And drunk them into the womb of the Luo people.  
His grandsons Obunga Osewe and Ologi crossed the gulf  
And arrived here in Kanyamwa.  
We were the first Luos to reach Milambo  
And all other Luos who came here were our guests.  
All the neighbouring tribes sought protection here  
Until they too went their ways.

'Some of them we chased away  
For bad behaviour.  
Some were witches, some were bad spirits,  
Some were liars, some were traitors,  
Some were greedy, some were lazy,  
Some were dirt incarnate, some were mutilators,  
Some were thieves, yet others were looters.  
Such people, son of Nyobilo woman,  
Can destroy the true people.  
Chase them away and remain with true people  
To form true generations.  
In their presence, seeker of wisdom,  
Development can only be an exercise in futility.

'Here I sit,  
Gor son of Ogada, son of Ogalo,  
Son of Osewe, son of Maroka  
Son of Bewo, son of Onyango,  
Son of Chwanya, son of Jok,  
Son of Jimbo, son of Ramogi II,  
Son of Oywa, son of Podho  
Son of Ramogi I, son of Luo II  
Son of Oru, son of Miserma  
Son of Rabong', son of Teful,  
Son of Luo I, son of Jarateng'.  
And many are the ancestors  
Whose names have gone  
With the death of the elders who knew them.  
Those we know are the outstanding ones only,  
Those who bequeathed us blessings and fame.  
And what good news it is  
That our line is not without blessings  
And a line not without a purpose!

'White man, son of Nyobilo woman,  
Man must have a purpose to live well:  
Without a purpose, he's like a beast or a bird  
Going by the dictates of day and night,  
Sun and moon, rain and drought.  
He will soon destroy himself.

'None of my ancestors was born to divide and kill.  
All were born to collect fragments and preserve life,  
That is our purpose.  
We attract friends and the lost ones,  
We ward off enemies and the evil ones.  
He who comes to us is a friend;  
Everybody is our friend or relative.  
If he's pretending, we'll soon see his buttocks.

'Yaye , our guest!  
What did Teful, our ancestor, do  
If not to lead his followers away  
From the path of brother-haters and bead-lovers?  
He followed the path leading to the west  
Curious to know the abode of the setting sun  
But turned south to discover the big water pot  
Called the Great Nam Ataro Lake.

Then the young Ramogi Ajwang' took over.  
He who was named after our ancestress Ajwang'  
Ajwang'—ae! The Great Lady:  
How women have poured blessings on our line!  
Ae Ramogi Ajwang'—  
You of the spear that would clean the sky  
Yet pierce the sky to pour forth rain in the dry seasons!  
Ajwang'—ae!  
You bewitched this land for the enemies  
And blessed it for descendants and friends.  
He who comes with bad designs on our land,  
Let him turn back and perish!  
Let the spell deal with the witches in our land.

'I say the ancestors who bore Jok are great  
The old man was so loving he married a loving woman.  
Awando welcomed her husband's guests  
As though they were her own.  
Here was Owila who was not of Awando's womb;  
Here was Bwai who Jok picked up in the Land of Bananas.  
And Awando too had her own children:  
Here was Rachuonyo: here was Chwanya  
And here was Wanjare who became unfortunate.

'Awando brought up five men:  
The light-legged Awando,  
She whose heels left the ground with a hundred desires!  
When that calamity befell Jok's homestead,  
It was Awando who became lonely on the plains:  
As lonely as Awando on the plains, we say.  
The other sons fled, scattered,  
But Chwanya and Bwai remained behind  
To wipe out the curse and fulfil customary needs.

'Where was the hostility between Bwai and Chwanya?  
Where was war in the designs of our ancestors?  
The Kwabwai and others in Ramba are our guests.  
Kanyamwa is the loved one of sojourners and the displaced;  
It is the centre of this country we call Ramba or Milambo.  
Those who occupy Milambo first lived here in Kanyamwa.  
Kanyamwa is the whole from which the fragments broke.'

For uncountable days and nights,  
The white man's pen was busy,

Engaged in lovemaking with book  
And the words were still pouring forth:  
Words as sweet as they were of truth.  
So the white man wrote until the pen was like his finger  
And the book like his loincloth.  
The Luos used to say that the spear was man's right hand.  
Our people, when the white man dropped the gun,  
The pen was his right hand, and the book his shield.

The white man said,  
'This is something!'  
He had written all his life,  
But not half as much....  
He had heard words all his life  
But not half as much....  
Pens became Hobley's fingers, and books his clothes;  
Gor told the white man to go and spread the word.

The white man was satisfied with words  
And the *Okoche* with food.  
(They had eaten so much  
They had to be escorted deeper into the bush—  
Oh, how you would abhor the bush those days!)  
When the white man saw that Gor's words were wisdom  
And that he was the most famous in this region  
He told him:  
'Gore, you're the Paramount Chief  
Of the whole of the South-western Kenya  
Which I've named Kavirondo.'

But Gor said he was already the Chief  
By the will of the ancestors and the people.  
'All the more why you should now rule for the Crown,'  
Said Hobley writing down a name and a job,  
'Gore Ogada, the Paramount Chief of South Kavirondo...  
His royal regalia consists of monkey-skin headgear,  
A leopard-skin dress indicates he's killed the beasts.  
A flywhisk made of wildebeest tail...sandals...  
And the chiefly staff and stool are like his weapons.  
His blackness is shining; his eyes are shining—obviously  
One of the tall and smooth-skinned Sudanic people  
Prophet Isaiah talks about.'

And he gave Gor a gown as befits a big Chief

But Gor refused to wear it  
Preferring the dress of his ancestors and people.  
People sang of the Chief who refused to wear the gown,  
'Gor are you the white man's Chief?' asked they in song.  
Then Gor lifted his feet, rocked his body  
Like the old tree that does not break  
He swayed gracefully as in a storm.  
Lifting up his hand, people saw thunderbolt around it  
But it was only his wildebeest-tail flywhisk  
Reaching up to the sun, the stars and the Lake.  
People were frozen by his glory  
Then he thundered:  
'No! I was a chief, I am still a chief  
In the name of my ancestors and their progeny.  
Blind excitement made Elephant fall into fire  
And blind imitation caused Hare to burn his arse.'

## **The Gun, the Spear and the Water**

The Kanyamwa were happy because nothing had changed.  
They still had their Chief as of old.  
No hyaenas had been fished from holes to rule them;  
No big man would deprive them of their wives and lives  
And no blood had been shed because of the strangers.

In one peaceful afternoon,  
Gor asked Hobley why he had travelled so far,  
Only to occupy the black man's land  
And Hobley replied, 'Upon all the earth,  
Not only in this godforsaken wilderness,  
The Crown has a divine responsibility:  
To impose peace and order,  
To stop uncouth races from annihilating one another.  
You Africans are so war-like, you know.'

Gor asked, 'Don't you also fight?  
Shall we then occupy your land?'

Hobley laughed and said,  
'No, we stopped fighting a long time ago,  
And our last war was for a just cause.  
Now, we can't fight among ourselves.  
We are too civilised for that—  
I forgot—civilisation is our mission.'

Gor was happy, with the white man in Kanyamwa  
But not when he moved beyond.  
Disaster lay ahead in Karungu.  
Ougo had been training his people to meet the band.  
These strange men, the *Okoche* and the Lord,  
Who sowed sorrow in Gor  
Only sowed unity and inspiration in the Karungu.  
Disaster lay ahead in Karungu.

Gor sent them a message,  
‘These strangers, brothers,  
Are wielding sticks  
And in those sticks is fire  
And that fire carries death;  
The toughest shield cannot stop it.’

Ougo merely responded,  
‘Then we’re going to use logs!’

The Karungu set about making wooden shields;  
From the tough *kang’o* trees the shields were made.  
‘That thing like fire,’ Ougo roared  
‘Must be stopped!  
Never can a *bogno* take our land.  
If he comes with fire,  
We shall use water!’  
He looked at the vast Lake  
And the flat beaches  
And decided the battle must be fought there.

Gor was tortured by what he foresaw;  
He sent the Karungu more words:  
‘This white man—  
Watch the ghosts of those who are trailing him.  
They talk of rivers and falls of blood,  
Of the manure of cadavers he’s scattered across the earth.  
They talk of his greed to possess man and material,  
Even when the Assembly of Creators say “No”,  
He’s determined to rule the earth  
At the cost of the extermination of our race.  
They talk of his lust for power  
Which he has dreamt and worked to satiate:  
He has the stick and you have the spear  
Who shall win?’



And Ougo responded,  
‘We too were born of women like him;  
We too can transform him into a wailing ghost.’

The Okoche met spears in Karungu  
And before they realized, many of them had fallen.  
The white man shouted, ‘Ready! Fire!’  
For the Karungu, the order sounded funny:  
‘Hurrdheny! Fuayaaa!’ they mimicked Hobley.  
But the fire began to burn out their lives  
And though they fought bravely  
The spears could not match the guns  
And the wooden shields could not block the bullets.  
Then Ougo gave the last order before he was killed,  
‘To the Lake, brothers! To the Lake!’  
The warriors ran to the Lake  
And swam in it using their wooden shields  
But lo! What fire!  
Even the water could not extinguish it!

The corpses that floated on the Lake Lolwe  
That season of storms and big waves  
Were more than the fish in numbers—  
Were more than the *lukwata* ,  
Crocodiles, snakes and epidemics  
Had caused before.  
The burials that were done in Karungu that season  
Made nonsense of the funeral rites.  
Never had a land seen such death,  
Not even during the slaying by bad spirits.

And the Okoche sang victory songs  
And Hobley wrote down the song:

*We chant the valour long foreseen  
Of those undaunted warriors of Britannia  
Who by the bayonets broadcast death  
Upon the untamed Karungu folk.*

And Gor seeing that his kinsmen had been wiped out  
Paced up and down in great anguish  
Drawing in his pipe without taking it off  
And muttering repeatedly:

'I warned them, I warned them!'  
But he knew that his kinsmen had the right to fight:  
Even a weak man has the right to defend his mother.

Were these strangers the ones about whom it was said  
That if they attacked your mother  
Then you were to resignedly say,  
'Run on mother! Run on!  
Oh, they are killing you!'  
But would the land run, even in such profanation?  
If that were so, then the hills were about to burst  
The Lake to boil and the Nyametho comet to crash.

'Perhaps the Karungu were right,' said Gor.  
Aha, when the prophet forgets his prophecy!  
'A time comes when each has to choose his way  
Yet if only we didn't make fragments of choices!  
A time comes when death is a way of living in dignity.  
Ougo will always live in the hearts and mouths of many.  
They killed him; they might as well eat his flesh  
But the brave will always live.'

Gor was mourning his kinsman  
And the bitter spirit of Ougo came back to earth.  
'I was not a thief or a rapist:  
Why was I killed?' he asked.  
Gor had no answer.

People of our homestead,  
Those who were named after Ougo  
Have aged and died,  
Yet his ghost still asks,  
'Why was I shot down like a rogue buffalo,  
Yet I no crime committed,  
Yet I nobody wronged?'

How then our people,  
Shall we appease the ghosts  
Of our men who stood to block  
The destructive path of the white lord?

Shall we not take a goat to their tombs,  
And then as we slit its throat chant,  
'*Jaduong', tinende wakeloni diel?*'

That means, 'Elder, today we've brought you a goat.'  
What more can we do?

## The Fire, Oh!

Ae, what fire consumed our land!  
The whole world of the black man groaned  
Under the affliction of this colonial plague.  
The band tore through the country like bull elephants  
Ravaged the villages, ransacked kraals  
Drove away cattle, roasted goats and fowls  
Kidnapped and raped women, massacred men  
And in their trail left pungent human waste.

Let the diviner tell of the pain of the land.  
I, Adega ny'Olando, am crying:  
What fire consumed our land!  
They burned Ugenya like fuel;  
They killed the Uyoma like bad snakes;  
They burned the Karungu even in cold waters!

Yaye, let the diviner go through fire!  
The bulls of men who were consumed,  
Don't their memories still pain us?  
Where is Ojijo k'Oteko,  
He who did not want to be robbed  
Of his hard-earned harvest?  
So when the colonialist went to loot his granary  
He grabbed him by the leg, hurled him in the air  
And flung him to the ground,  
Breaking his bones to pieces.  
O, they regrouped!  
The Lord's band regrouped  
Rounded son of Oteko like a quarry,  
Spirited him away and slaughtered him  
Saying that his head was hard.  
People of our homestead,  
The head is hard that refuses to be robbed  
And has to be crushed!

Let me also remember them:  
The ones who were called 'Corpses in the Bushes'.  
Those were the braves who said:  
'Better die than accept a wrong?'  
Their names are still invoked in war,

They were corpses in far away bushes,  
Whose bodies could not be retrieved for burial.  
Mothers yoo ! Come and weep with me!  
How much pain mothers have undergone!  
You never even saw the bodies of your fallen sons.  
Mothers of Karungu yoo!  
You never saw the corpses of your loved ones  
For they were buried deep in the womb of the Lake  
Or in the belly of Lake monsters,  
So you buried logs in their stead.  
Did your sons rush into the mouth of a beast  
Whose nature they didn't know?  
Weeping came to our land then  
And it has not yet stopped.

## Wizard

The nephew to the Kanyada became a traveller:  
To all parts the Lake region they travelled with the white man.  
His words were used to draw boundaries for all territories.  
It was Gor who knew each group, its ways and origins  
And his words were heard and presence felt  
And so Hobley ka Nyobilo wrote down,  
'This is an elderly man who's feared as a wizard.'  
And he asked Gor, truly desiring to know,  
'All these things that are said about you,  
Are they true?'

Aha, what a question to ask Gor!  
But Gor answered, honestly desiring to tell:  
'All these things that are said about me—  
That I change into other men and beasts  
That I confuse by performing unnatural feats—  
All these are slander and cause of my great embarrassment.  
Son of fellow elder,  
There are those who make a living by slander  
Their pots are ever busy:  
Cooking lies and schemes.  
When I look at them,  
I see only skulls,  
Empty skulls!'

The white man was not convinced,  
He thought of primitive secrets,  
Sorcery and primitive societies; he asked,

‘Then where does all this talk spring from?’

Gor pitied him, pitied this adventurer  
Who was also a knowledge gatherer.  
He saw himself in him and sympathised.  
‘Well,’ he said, ‘son of fellow elder,  
Here in Milambo we don’t die with knowledge.  
We broadcast it in daylight,  
Though you may see but not understand it.  
You have to be me; you have to be us  
And that is the first miracle.  
You see, son of Nyobilo woman,  
I’m a man of words,  
But once out of my mouth,  
Words turn into things  
And I’m not responsible for what people see.’

The white man called Hobley Obilo ka Nyobilo  
Looked sharply at Gor, puzzled,  
But had he seen things?

He saw things come out of Gor’s mouth  
And saw Gor become those things.  
He thought, Oh dear son of Hobley,  
Today I’ve been bewitched!  
Curse my ancestors for this curious bent;  
Why did I want to know?  
Curiosity killed the cat.  
He asked, ‘You mean, you are an actor?’

‘Stop it, son of Nyobilo woman!  
Don’t you ever use that word on Mahia!  
Actor, what is that? A monkey?  
A player with words?  
I’m no weaverbird that weaves words;  
When I say “O *moro*!” , the *omoro* comes,  
When I say “Anthill!” , there is an anthill  
And when I say “Elephant!” , there is an elephant.’

The white man could not understand it  
But was full of awe  
For when Gor had said ‘*O moro* !’  
A rare antelope came and replaced Gor;  
And when he saw Gor disappear

And an anthill and elephant successively take his place,  
And men of different ages and races  
And beasts of distant ages and species,  
Flit in and out of Gor's aura,  
He said he couldn't understand 'things African'.

The white man wrote down about Gor,  
'This is a wizard, pure and simple—  
A genius too, he could be:  
Probably, no man has ever been so many things;  
Probably, no man has ever been so many men  
And certainly no man has ever had affinity  
With so many ages, races and species.'

Gor walked with the Hobley and his band  
And saw all their feats and evils.  
They had neither kinsmen to sympathise with  
Nor friends to try to please.  
They only had henchmen who they ruled  
And who helped them rule  
With fists like clubs,  
Teeth like iron,  
Hearts like stone  
And bodies like timber.

He saw these henchmen, some great elders,  
Being insulted, snubbed and ordered about.  
But still, they were inspired:  
They acquired the habits of their Lord.  
They took the people to be their foes  
And the Lord and *Okoche* to be friends.  
But one thing Gor knew:  
That the Lord was nobody's friend.  
He was like a child  
To be pampered without complaint,  
To be served without expecting a word of thanks in return.  
The Luos were right to call him Bogno,  
For he was a baby creature;  
But he was also a tricky creature.  
What magic did he use to cow the black men  
And to rally so many to his side?  
The great, donning his dress,  
Bowed in awe and deference.  
People who the other day were nobodies

Now felt like their heads touched the sky.  
They wielded guns, whips and new language.

The old adage was working:  
The Enemy must use your kinsman to finish you.  
Your roots are hidden deep in your soil,  
Only your kinsman can help the stranger find it  
And like a mole cut it or rip it off  
And then you will wilt like a diseased plant  
And dry, you will be used for firewood. Ae!  
The fire will cook other people's food!

So Gor became wary of the Lord and henchmen;  
He studied them like the insides of a goat.  
He took the Lord's fiery stick  
And gave it to the smiths to study.  
He vowed to take his children to study  
The way the pen makes love to books  
And become an extension of the right hand  
Like a spear in a warrior's hand.

But soon he was fed up with the henchmen,  
They infuriated him with their new words,  
'We the 'portant people,' they boasted,  
'They the sawdust,' they said of the people.  
'They get in chest, in nose, in eyes...'  
But for the sawdust,  
They would turn into dust!

The travels with the *Okoche* and their Lord,  
Brought fatigue to Gor's heart  
And he came back to Kanyamwa with a heavy heart.  
He had seen dams of blood broken.  
He had seen files of cattle rustled and driven away;  
At the white man's camp, he saw the loot.  
There at the camp in Kisumu,  
The *Okoche* made merry; plenty was the food

Gor had seen the new death;  
It could not be compared to any in the wars of old.  
In the past a spear or two could fell a victim  
And if you thought you could not stand the spear  
You could flee and tell your story of escape.

But the gun our people, the gun!  
The gun kills even if you outrun the enemy.

So Gor came to Kanyamwa with a heavy heart  
And he saw a vision:  
The files of cattle turned into files of men  
Being taken away into slavery  
To slash leaves of plants with hands,  
To work with metals: bones against iron,  
To dig trenches: their own graves,  
To tend crops which they would not use.  
And all these industrious men  
Never returned to restore the glory of the land  
And souls were lost in the wilderness of a new world.

To those who gave him their ears he said,  
'You'll take a hundred years sinking into the deep swamp  
And another one hundred struggling out of it.  
Only then will you clean yourself of the mire  
And begin to live like humans.'

## Monkey Died on Rope

Here in Kanyamwa, Gor stood atop the Sigama Hill,  
Looked far and saw that time had not come to retire.  
He could see the murky waters of Sori,  
The fighting men across the Lake in Uyoma  
And the highland neighbours  
Being hunted down like plague-causing rats.

So back to the new world Gor went  
To bring back order, peace and wholeness.

He set out for Gem to see Odera Ulalo.  
In the company of Ogalo Nyaguga,  
He set out to see a fellow chief.  
Odera Ulalo was the Chief of Gem,  
A man so big no house would contain him  
And no food or drink would satiate him.  
When the Lord came, he inspected Odera  
'A nice giant of a specimen,' he said.  
'You shall now rule for us your people  
And scare for us our enemies.'  
And Odera provided an army and porters  
So the Lord could use them in conquering others.



Indeed he had partook in the raids  
And shared in the white man's booty.  
For his service, he was given hundreds of cattle to keep  
But did he know that to keep is not to eat?

A bit far off to the west were the headstrong Uyoma  
Who had beaten off the Lord and Okoche.  
They had told the invaders bravely,  
'Please, babies and nurses,  
Use a better weapon than the cooking stick.'  
Aha! They had called the Lord and his army babies and nurses  
And advised them to mind their manners:  
To undergo toilet training and learn table manners.  
It was said that the Okoche defecated in their trousers  
When they saw the Uyoma in their scary military attire:  
Baboon-skin headgear,  
Colubus-monkey dress  
And hippo teeth decoration.

When the battle ended,  
The Okoche were utterly, utterly destroyed  
And the babies had no one to care for them.  
So the Lord said,  
'Only their brothers will know their roots and ways.'  
A motley army was formed to deal with the Uyoma.  
Odera Ulalo was at its head.  
The Uyoma fought bravely,  
But the fire, oh!  
The fire burned them  
And their Gem brothers cowed them.  
All their huts were burnt, the cattle looted,  
And their women driven to Gem  
Turned into concubines and wives;  
And called 'daughters of the enemy'.

Odera Ulalo made a feast: beer, women, meat....  
Everything was there for a celebration.  
The Okoche ate like hyaenas:  
They picked the bones clean and licked dishes dry.

And Gor arrived as they made merry  
Feeling the groans of the Uyoma in his heart  
And the moans of their women in his body.

Throughout the journey, he was grieved;  
Odera Ulalo pestered him like a disease-causing ghost.  
‘How did the land give birth to such monsters?’  
Then Gor realized that the land  
Will always be full of monsters;  
Our task is to tame them.

Seeing that he was changing into many sagged bodies,  
Of the Uyoma braves who had died,  
Gor’s companion, Ogalo Nyaguga, said,  
‘Son of Ogada, didn’t we welcome the Bogno?’  
Gor did not reply.

Our people say of the monkey’s burden,  
‘The monkey once desired for a long tail and he got it.’  
The monkey has to tow the tail  
And learn to live with it.

Odera noticed the guests and became suspicious.  
As Gor crossed the bridge to his home, Odera said,  
‘What wild cat is that approaching my home?’  
Go and tell him to wait for me beyond the river.’  
And Gor retraced his steps across the bridge  
As Odera with cronies drank beer from *dak* pots.

Odera hated Gor Mahia with all his heart and big body  
Because Gor was so powerful and fearless.  
Perhaps if Gor were not there, he would be the Lord  
Of all the Lake region christened ‘Kavirondo’.  
‘If only Gor were not there!’ he mused.  
Then a thought struck him like the fire cock  
And he resurrected from his momentary death  
And ordered his magicians to cast a spell  
On a drinking straw and a bull.

Odera Ulalo thought Gor was not at the party,  
That he was far beyond the river.  
But there where he was drinking,  
A bee buzzed; what a bee!  
Around his head and ear this bee buzzed  
And Odera could not enjoy his drink in peace.

To some, this was just an ordinary bee,  
To the others it was a magical messenger of good news.

So they urged the insect,  
'Oh bee, tell us that the Lord is coming  
On us medals to bestow  
For breaking the bones of the Uyoma-shit!'

But to Odera, something else was happening:  
A thousand bees filled his head with noise  
And asked something like:  
'Where are the bootiesZZZ of war?  
Where—RRR—the cattle you RRRruszzZZZZLED in war?'  
Then Odera Ulalo became guilty with the knowledge  
That he had slaughtered half the herd  
And distributed others among his cronies  
And that at this rate,  
He would have no booty to boast about.

But it was not boasting which was the worry:  
If the Lord asked him for the cattle, the booty,  
He would just stammer in confusion.  
Was the Lord really a friend? Odera wondered.

Odera ordered his men to kill the bee  
But it dodged the weapons and stung Odera's ear.  
In pain and panic, Odera roared.  
The bee disappeared, as suddenly as it had appeared  
Leaving Odera in no mood to eat or drink anymore.  
He looked across the river and ordered his men,  
'Tell that badly-dressed man to come here!'  
What a bad omen! he thought,  
This man is a sorcerer,  
But we shall see!

Gor and Ogalo were brought to the party.  
Drinking straws were thrown in their direction  
'Man from Yonder, drink the Gem beer,' said Odera.  
Ogalo drank to his fill,  
But Gor just put the straw in his mouth,  
He would not suck it;  
He just studied the people around the beer pots  
And saw Odera Ulalo looking at him intensely.  
With concealed triumph, Odera asked,  
'How are you feeling Man-from-across-the Lake?'  
And Gor replied, with concealed mischief,  
'Never have I taken a stronger beer, oh Great Warrior!'

And the communal pots were replenished; they were ever full.

When Gor saw that people were drunk  
He took Ogalo Nyaguga's drinking straw  
Claiming that his straw had been blocked.  
Then he drunk a little just to quench his thirst.

Odera brought the bull to Gor's sight and said:  
'Now, son of the people of Yonder,  
I want to teach you how to feed guests.  
This bull is all yours; we'll slaughter it for you.'  
The bull was slaughtered and its meat cooked  
But Gor declined to eat it  
Claiming that the beer had filled his stomach.  
Then Odera roared,  
'What brought you here,  
Man-from-where-grasses-grow tall?'

And Gor thought he recognized in that voice  
The roar of the Ratego spirits.  
And Gor readily told Odera,  
'O Chief Odera the Everlasting,  
I've walked a long way to reach here.  
On the way, people would ask me about my destination  
And I'd tell them I'm going to see one of my kind,  
That I'm going to give him the word that we be one  
From one horn of our land to another,  
That we shall not suffer no matter what plagues befalls us  
And that with the leaders such as the one I'm going to see  
There are going to be no hostilities among ourselves  
And that such hostilities as caused by one of us  
Rustling cattle from another and killing people of our kind  
Should be seen as results of our folly and greed  
And may lead to death of those who think they have benefitted  
From the new dispensation  
And make nonsense of our victory celebrations  
And the kinship we think we've established  
Between ourselves and strangers...'

'Enough Gor! Enough!' shouted Odera.  
'I know you're the most righteous man around the Lake.  
Once the Kanyamwa bushmen had many cattle  
But you slaughtered them all pretending to be divining  
While you were only satisfying your sweet tooth

Or, are they the famous gums?  
We know your gums needs constant pressing by meat  
And constant oiling by animal fat.  
You've cleverly impoverished the Kanyamwa:  
You're the rat that bites terribly  
But eases the pain by blowing fresh breath on the wound.  
I took away the Uyoma cattle openly and by my strength—  
Not by some magical ruse and righteousness as you'd do  
And now I know you want a share of my hard-earned wealth.  
*Ng'ouu* ! Never has a son of Gem given away wealth  
To a trickster and a worm that kills the host painlessly.  
Gor the Trickster, I'm also Odera:  
Trickster of Tricksters, Husband of Husbands  
And we're not of one kind.  
Look at the way you're dressed—  
Leopard skin and monkey cap.  
If you so wanted to be a monkey or leopard  
Why didn't you use your magic to change into both  
Instead of skinning the poor animals  
As if they rustled your cattle, sheep or goats?  
Well, we shall not have peace and civilisation  
If we're that cruel to animals of the wild.  
And we shall not be one here in our land  
If some people aspire to be monkeys and leopards.  
Now, get out of my sight  
Before my spirits get mad!

Before Gor left, he told Odera:  
'Oh Everlasting Chief son of Ulalo  
All those you killed before living their full lives  
Are crying that you live for them their lives.  
Behold Odera, the Everlasting.  
The white man is coming to demand for the loot  
But you hardly have any left because you've depleted it  
In your farewell party with hyaenas.  
What a great everlasting brave you are!  
The whole Gem and Okoche are eating in your name!'

Odera said that Gor was turning words upside down  
And should therefore be stopped  
Whereupon the Gem warriors rose up  
And chased Gor with the intention to kill him.  
But the son of Ogada was too clever for them.  
A blink of his eye at the sky

Caused it to come down with thunder and lightning  
And the river near Odera's home was flooded  
And became impassable even for frogs and fish.  
Gor said to Ogalo, looking over the floods,  
'The soldier bee has been hit and there's commotion!'

Presently, Odera received a message:  
The Lord was coming,  
All the way from the Kisumu Palace,  
The Lord was coming for the booty.  
'What a host of visitors!' he said as he moved helter skelter.  
He ended the feast and ordered people to sleep  
Though the sun had yet to shut its eye on the land.

Odera was as uneasy as a woman in labour;  
He became the proverbial Aringo Misalo,  
Moving here and there  
Without planting his bottoms here or there.  
But there was still hope: the Lord might spare him.  
Had he not bowed before him and said,  
'All this land I give to you Lord?'  
Had he not fought for him every battle and won?  
The Gem people were all for *Osirkal*.  
The Nandi tribesmen were counting losses  
And the Uyoma were cowed.  
But one sure thing disturbed Odera:  
The Lord was unpredictable  
And hardly appreciative.  
In all his years as a faithful servant  
He had yet to hear the Lord say, 'Thank you.'

The sun turned blood red in the west;  
Odera went to bed.

The next day the white man didn't come:  
He sent a policeman he had named Tumbako,  
A man Odera had seen grow  
From a weakling of a baby to a well-set lad  
Who went to Kisumu to cook the Lord's food  
And then later enlist in the police service.

Tumbako was a puff-udder when he came to Odera's;  
He hated Odera for having snatched his mother  
From his poor old father who had died in grief.

This was the time to avenge his father's death.  
He hit the sky with bullets to announce his arrival  
And pandemonium broke loose in Gem.  
'The Lord wants all his cattle!' Tumbako thundered.  
The great chief said he would collect cattle from the villages.  
'The Lord wants his cattle *now* !' said Tumbako firmly  
And proceeded to collect the few cattle from the compound.

Odera's climb to the mountain of wealth  
Could only end in a crash.  
Ai, the mountains are crashing!  
The mountains will crash  
On those who stuff their mushroom heads  
With wealth ill-gained.  
Our people, all that you work for will last  
But that which you get out of stealing  
Will leave you and disappear into the Lake.  
The mountains will crash on you, kinsmen,  
If work is not your prayer  
And if your wealth is only loot.

Odera said, 'Tumbako son of Gem,  
If you a mere child whose mother I keep  
Can humiliate me like a slave  
Then I leave you this earth!  
This earth I leave to you.'  
Then he cursed everybody and sneaked away.

Every wild cat must to his death sneak.  
I, Adega ny'Olando, am speaking;  
I, the daughter of the people, am singing.  
Before Tumbako went back to Kisumu,  
Odera was found hanging on a rope  
In his conference hut,  
He held conference with ghosts and died.  
His face was on the roof,  
His neck broken and his fingers cursing  
His tongue was longer than his tall body.

When word reached Kisumu that Odera had hanged himself  
Those who knew the white man's language heard him say  
That the monkey died on its own rope.  
And the rope was his own tail of desire.

But Odera's cronies said, 'Heee!'  
And trooped to Kisumu wailing,  
'He's been killed! Killed like a monkey!'  
Then the white man in alarm asked, 'Who killed him?'  
The Gem answered in unison, 'That Cunning One, Gor!'

'Gore! That's interesting!' the white man said.  
He desired for entertainment made in Africa  
And a relief from the administrative drabness.  
He was a new District Commissioner;  
We called him Omtidi, though he said he was Hemsted  
He was fresh from the university  
Where he had read about Africa  
And had so desired to experience our land.  
Hobley's journal had been his pastime.  
Now this white man had read and heard about Gor  
As a man who could play any role or take any form:  
But he had not seen Gor; and he wanted to see him,  
In any form, so long as he didn't turn into nothing.  
'African magic too can be amusing,' he reasoned.  
'How can a man of flesh and blood like me  
Change into some other man or thing or nothing?  
He must be an impersonator *par excellence*  
Just like professional actors are.'

He called out to his messengers,  
'Hey you Long Tooth!  
And Crooked Toe!  
Get me Gore here quick!  
Or else I pull your tooth longer  
And rid you, Crooked Toe, of ugly toes!  
Now, on your marks, get set, go!'  
Our people, the messengers ran without looking behind  
And in the blinking of an eye,  
They had traversed five territories:  
Kano plains, Nyakach plains and plateau,  
Karachuonyo, Kochia and Kanyada.  
Lands that took people days to cover  
And calling places to reach—  
They covered in one day without rest.

When they reached Kanyamwa they said,  
'O word! The Lord at Kisumu wants to see the Chief!'  
There where they delivered the message they collapsed



And had to be revived by milk from Kanyamwa cattle:  
Thick milk fermented, sweetened and cooled in a pot.  
O how the messengers drank whole pots of milk  
Till the crooked toes straightened  
And the long tooth shortened!  
They willed to be Gor's messengers; if only he asked them!  
But Gor sent them back to their white master.  
He summoned one athlete and orator,  
'Odihul Onger, it is you who are light,  
Go and tell the white man I'm ill.  
But he should tell you what's the matter.'

When Odihul reached Kisumu, Odera's cronies said:  
'Hee! This is not him!  
We want Gor to give us our son back!'

'Did he go with him to Kanyamwa?' Odihul asked.

'No, he killed him!'

The white man came in, 'Are you Gore?'  
'No!' said Odihul. 'He's my chief;  
He's ill, so I've come to stand in for him.'  
'Are you his lawyer or something?'  
'Sir, I'm only his son.  
I speak true words well  
And transform them if need be.'  
'So you transform words, not yourself?'  
'Sir, nobody can transform himself  
Only words can transform you,  
If you speak them truly in your heart.'

It was all balderdash, the D. C. thought,  
The sooner he got rid of them, the better.

'Okay,' Hemsted said looking at papers.  
'Gore is accused of murdering O. D. Era Oolar-loo.'

Odihul asked, 'How did Gor kill Odera?'

The accusers responded, 'He killed him with mischief!'  
Odera's people talked of tricks, magic and curses,  
But not exactly of how Gor murdered Odera.

Then Odhul Onger talked,  
'You say Gor killed Odera.  
Did he beat him with a club,  
Or stab him with a spear,  
Or slash him with a machete  
Or strangle him with his hands?'

'We are telling you it is his mischief, his witchcraft!  
Gor is a cursed wizard, a jealous murderer!  
Let him come to Gem again—he'll meet floods!'

The white man got impatient and stopped the proceedings:  
'All this is nonsense!' and the case ended there.  
Honestly, he could not understand this talk:  
Witchcraft, mischief and curses—what were they?  
But he guessed that Gor might be a very good play actor.

## Pushing Logs

Gor saw how difficult it was to bring the chiefs together.  
It was like bringing heads of bulls together:  
They would fight to death before ceding territories  
And while they fought, the land would suffer.  
Gor wanted to fight them,  
But not where people would be trampled  
And not by raising spears and shields.  
He had fought enough diverse wars,  
So he knew which one was appropriate.

When all the Chiefs came to Kisumu,  
Gor gathered them for talks and jokes:  
He called them to talk, as brothers should.  
Here was Kitoto of Kano, Muganda of Ugenya,  
Kere of Nyakach, Onyando of Kisumu,  
Kasuku of Wagasi, Anayo of Kochia....  
All the chiefs gathered to hear the Great Mahia.

Where the chiefs were,  
They were butterflies beautifying the house.  
The gowns they wore  
Were the Lord's stamp on them,  
Glittering like glow worms in a dark night.  
They were talking of how great they were;  
How their people were drowning them in gifts  
So that they would spare them labour and punishment,

How foolish the people were,  
To think that the chiefs could just sit back  
And let them go about their businesses undisturbed.

The grandson to Ogalo was in his royal leopard skin,  
In his sandals and a long hat  
He looked extraordinarily tall in his attire.  
In his right hand was a flywhisk.  
Sitting coolly by his side was his dog, Tioliyo.

The chiefs nudged themselves,  
Till Kere stood up and grumbled,  
'Why did one of us die  
After another one of us had visited him?'  
There was the chorus among the chiefs,  
'Yes, tell us son of Ogada,  
You called us to put our words together.  
Why did one of us die?'

Some chiefs were looking at Gor's dog and saying,  
'Is the dog the assistant chief of Kanyamwa?'  
The dog defiantly stared back at them.

In that gathering, there was no peace  
Because Gor told the chiefs what they didn't want to hear.  
'Odera Ulalo died because he had a large stomach.  
Why did he rob people of their cattle and then devour them  
Like a beast with a special taste for domestic animals?  
Don't you know what happened in Uyoma?  
Are there no babies crying for milk there now?  
Now, you come here to punch me like the sacrificial goat  
Till I die a slow death.  
But I tell you, I won't die.  
I came here not to die  
But to tell you to think and act together  
So that we may end the sufferings of our people.  
I was a chief before anybody invaded our land  
One thing I know: the chief should be of the people  
And then the people shall love the chief.  
The people are our right hands, our spears;  
No protection is better than that that you get from them.  
If we hate the people, then we hate ourselves  
And nothing good shall we do to ourselves.  
Look at you great sons of Luo dressed in colourful gowns.

Shall you not provide the light for the people?  
Or is it the case that the glow worm  
Does not enlighten the darkest of all nights?’

Gor talked to the chiefs for a day  
Until they were feeling like the wrongdoers they were  
Until they were scratching their flesh off their bodies.  
In guilt, they were itching. Gor said,  
‘The worst enemy is not that who comes from across the seas;  
The worst enemy is that who comes from the neighbourhood.’

The chiefs wanted to kill Gor because he was talking much,  
Talking what they called ‘bulls of words’  
Which gave them stomach burns.

Gor saw their schemes; he was their greatest worry  
So he turned into their biggest problem.  
He turned into such logs  
As could be the oldest and biggest in the land  
And blocked the entrance to the room of palaver  
And the soft hands of the chiefs had to push, push, push  
Till their palms were peeling off and chests bursting.  
When they pushed, the logs only rolled a little.  
It could not be cut because the dog was fiercely protecting it  
And the dog could not be chased because it had power.

The dog forced the chiefs to roll the logs up to Kanyamwa.  
The colourfully dressed ones tripped and fell in their gowns,  
Sweated blood, breathed out steam, collapsed and cried:  
‘Ai fellow chief, why do to us like this?’  
They were used to being carried like babies by their slaves  
But today they were the slaves.  
Now they knew how pot-bellied bodies could be heavy;  
Now they knew what a burden they were to the people.

When they reached Kanyamwa, Gor became himself again,  
Said sorry and welcomed his colleagues.  
Bulls were slaughtered and pots of *kuon* made.  
Oh how they ate and were grateful!  
To be sure, they ate ten bulls and a hundred chicken,  
Took beer and everything that was brought before them.  
They only spared the plates and dishes!  
Then Gor showed them around Kanyamwa:  
The land of working people and no disappointment;

The land of plenty where fruits and pumpkins grew wild  
The land of happiness in spite of the colonial plague.  
This was the land of Gor Mahia and the ancestors.

Gor bade the chiefs good-bye with these words:  
‘The earth will one day swallow our bodies,  
The wind will blow away our spirits,  
But he who is good in the eyes of the people  
Shall remain forever in their memories  
And shall be born anew in their children  
And shall be called The-one-who-goes-and-returns.’

## **The Snakes Arrive...**

Our people, Gor had foreseen everything:  
Had he not warned people of them?  
And when the things came to pass  
He witnessed them and held converse with people  
About the meanings of things strange and new.

When the railway reached Kisumu, he was there.  
Then he said it was the road of poverty and departure  
But never the road of wealth and return.  
How to make it the road of return and plenty  
Was therefore the challenge of all times.

Important still was how to tame the rail,  
So that not a drop of blood can on it be squeezed;  
So that death in its wake does not lurk.

A vision had come to Gor,  
A voice had cried out:  
‘Come and witness the snake arriving  
Oh Gor, the earth is one.  
Some people think the Lake is one country  
And the Coast is another,  
And across the seas is another world.  
But today the long snake has arrived  
With goods and words from yonder.  
Oh Mahia, the earth is one  
Connected by the windy length of the reptile:  
Here we are at the head,  
There they are at the tail.’

The snake traversed the land;

Some people hid from it  
Fearing it had a poisonous bite;  
Some attacked it;  
Some just stared at it;  
A few studied it;  
Yet others boarded it,  
Went from one end to another on it.  
Some came back with tales and tales;  
Some with more learning;  
But hardly any wealth or wisdom.

Yes, the earth was one,  
Like one fruit of an orange,  
But it was yet to become ours:  
We were falling off it  
As it tossed too fast for us  
And we had no centrifugal force to hold us  
And we had no muscles to help us.  
Wherefore were we put on this planet  
If the race was too much?  
Wherefore were we put on this planet  
If our race cannot compete?

All this pained Gor so.  
'Shall this reptile at our doorstep throw up trash  
And then to enrich itself swallow us up?  
Shall the survivors remain  
Spectators and cheerleaders forever  
Of its sinister advance?'

Children were born and grew up to be goatherds  
Gor was at Kisumu again  
To witness the launching of the sea snake—  
It was called ss. *Nyanza*.  
The D.C. at Kisumu called Omtidi  
Had invited Gor and other chiefs to witness the wonder.

The ship was big:  
To the people it was a floating island.  
It could carry an army,  
It could transport all cattle to Bananaland  
And all produce to the Land of Magicians.  
Yes, we too had boats  
But not those that belched smoke,

Charging at waves like enraged sea bulls;  
Not those which were markets and stores;  
Not those which were armoury and oil tanks;  
Not those which were bedrooms and rest-rooms.

No big boat ever received such guard of honour.  
Black soldiers were at parade with guns;  
Black chiefs glittered in their gowns;  
The whites were expectant.  
No big boat ever received such a gun salute:  
'Ready! Fire!' the commander cried.  
Amidst reports of rifle fire and smoke in the startled air,  
The *Nyanza* slipped into the water  
And the white men rushed to board it  
And the chiefs tripped in the gowns clambering into it  
And marvelling and fear was great among the people.

Gor sneaked away  
Leaving his fellow chiefs on the deck  
He swam in the water up to Ogowe Beach:  
Fishermen were feeling useless in their boats.  
He bought a boat and told the fishermen,  
'You too can build such a marvel!  
Be proud of your boats

As lions are proud of their cubs—  
They'll soon be lions!  
Build them big and shape them anew;  
It is your bull to which you sing praises.  
Some people in that snake are laughing  
But they know not where the monster came from  
Nor where it is going.  
My friends are boarding the monster  
To be seen that they are great and one with the whites  
But they forget that the monster is not theirs,  
That they may be thrown into the belly of the Lake  
For they have not paid to be there.  
They are laughing like children  
Whose happiness may be terminated by the adult's cane.  
Better be in a small boat that's yours  
Than in a big one that's not yours.'

## ...and Gor Snakes Around

Grandson to Ogalo  
Let me rattle you the gourd.  
You refused to be happy with the mob of chiefs  
For no white man made you a chief:  
You were a chief before the D.C.'s grandmother was wooed.  
You refused the white man's gown and blankets,  
Laughed when he said,  
'We shall cane all those who wear skins and fibres!'  
You never took off your royal leopard skin dress,  
Never dropped your *riwo* flywhisk,  
Never undonned you monkey-skin headgear,  
And never took off your cow-hide sandals  
Yet when you met proud fishermen  
Wearing loincloths, bare-chested  
Donned in headgear of monkey skins and feathers,  
Dangling a few fish for a catch,  
You told them that life is more than the scanty dress  
And the meagre catch,  
That they should think of a bigger catch  
And more elegant dress.

Let me sing, I, daughter of the people.  
Gor refused to marvel at what was not ours;  
He bought his own boat at Ogowe Beach  
And rowing in it, he said:  
'If the whites can come from far to sail in our Lake,



Why can't I come from near and row on the Lake?'

Gor rowed on far into the Lake.

The Lake was sparkling silver that afternoon.

A gentle breeze was playing on the water surface.

The boat was gliding like it was a sportsman on water.

Gor saw the vastness of the Lake.

Some time ago, was it the Lake

That put advance to the land?

Or was it the land that stopped the Lake

In Seme, Asembo, Sakwa and Yimbo beaches?

Was it the water that stopped the people

On Mihuru, Karungu, Gwasssi and Kochia beaches?

And why was the water ever hostile

On Kano, Nyakach and Kadem plains?

The land was helpless

And the people across the Lake were defeated, saying:

'Those on the other side are People of Yonder

They are different from us!'

But Gor said,

'The Lake is our unifying water mass;

You sail around it

And at every beach you land are brothers and sisters.'

He added,

'The earth is only one.

And only one wise people will be its king.'

Let us now row with Gor

Who said he must not be beaten.

If they had ship, he also had a boat.

And he rowed single-handedly on the Lake,

Landed in Yimbo and then camped on Got Ramogi.

Here on this hill, the young Ramogi had also camped,

Blessed the land for family and friends

And cursed it for witches and enemies.

From here on this hill, the descendants had spread,

Across the Lake and across the land

And so long ago was it, some had forgotten it.

It was a pleasant place to be:

Flat at the top, breezy,

Commanding the endless expanse of the Lake

And the series of islands: Mageta and all.

And a place of awe-striking works it was:

Spears made of stones, caves dug out by spirits  
And hearths like altars of sacrifice.  
Spirits were many here, and so were wonders  
And Gor told the people of Sakwa, Alego and Yimbo  
Not to look on the wonders of the earth  
But to perform some of their own.  
Gor told the awestruck people,  
'Heroism is the legacy that Ramogi Ajwang'  
Bequeathed to you and your progeny.  
And so heroes you will be,  
But only if you seek heroism through wisdom.  
Yes, heroes will be born here!'

Gor told an Alego elder, Owira Moth,  
'The Lake is not an abyss to be feared;  
It is the liquid decoration of the earth.  
It's not a vast river of disunity.  
Let's have a party at the heart of the Lake.'

So people from one side of the Lake crossed to the other  
Because of Gor's encouraging words,  
Because Ramogi too had done it  
And people, like the earth, became one.  
At the heart of the Lake,  
Our hearts joined together.  
And we found the meaning of our existence.

Past the famous beaches, Gor rowed  
He sailed around the Uyoma peninsula,  
Along Asembo and Seme beaches  
And crossed over to Mount Huma:  
It spits hot liquid into the womb of the Lake.  
Gor rounded it and came upon the Mawigo beach.  
Oh, the beach was terrible!  
Giant crocodiles and monitor lizards,  
The *lukwata* diving from Osiri headland to the deeps...  
Gor said, 'One day,  
Something big will happen here.'  
And he left the Kochia and Kanyada wondering  
Whether their land too possessed some wonders.

He rowed on to Soklo Kipenji  
A hill so possessed by spirits  
It was risky to call out its name while at sea.

From the deeps of the Lake  
The islands jutted out like giants:  
The Rusinga, Mfangano, Ngodhe, Ndere...  
They were too high to be devoured by the water.  
Gor saw the Migingo, the island mountain that spews fire  
And is the abode of clouds and lightning;  
So many skeletons are strewn on its beaches,  
It is unwise to stay there.  
He saw Manga and Magare islands, the two bulls:  
Once they rivalled each other, broke into a bloody fight  
Reached a stalemate—none could push the other—  
And they froze, horns still locked at the heart of the Lake.

Gor passed the Rusinga Channel.  
The waters there were as swift as a waterfall  
And Gor knew that the spirits that manned it  
Had lived there from the beginning of the world  
But were still strong enough  
To madly drive the waters between land and island  
So that life may be in eternal flux in the Lake.  
'Cursed be he who blocks this race,'  
Gor said, 'Terrible though it is!'

And Gor talked with the spirits that lived on the islands.  
He told the spirits, 'We know you great ones,  
You were the first humans who lived on earth  
And you chose these islands and beaches,  
To be your abodes as flesh and spirits  
And now even the whites have come  
To visit the old homesteads.  
But don't you be harsh to our people  
Or else those who don't recognize you  
Will come and dispossess you of your abode.  
Don't you kill the people;  
Without them, you are gone.  
The sea monster is already here with us!'

And the spirits laughed good-humouredly and said,  
'That sea monster too will taste our rage.'

## **The Squanderer of Woman's Wealth**

Round and round Gor rowed  
Until he reached the Gwasssi beaches,  
Until he came upon Nyamgondho wuod Ombare—

Frozen, bent double, supported by a staff.  
His legs sunk into the water;  
His eyes staring resignedly into some point in the Lake  
And his face really wooden.  
Gor looked up to him from his boat and said,  
'I know you son of Ombare:  
Although you lived in the days of yore  
Tell me your tale of woe.'  
And he hit the wooden face repeatedly  
Until it cried out animatedly,  
'Stop child, let me be.  
This is my fate:  
I chanced upon a blessing, but chose a curse.  
So let me be.'

It was a sad story, Gor knew,  
So sad the spirit couldn't tell it anew:  
Son of Ombare was a poor fisherman:  
He was the owner of an unlucky trap only.  
When Nyamgondho was hungry  
Fish would not come the way of the trap.  
Then one day, the trap got a special catch.  
Nyar Nam, Daughter of the Lake, herself  
Was tightly trapped  
And Nyamgondho brought her home.  
She brought the poor man wealth and joy—  
Livestock, poultry, wives—  
Until son of Ombare puffed up like a frog  
Insulted, assaulted and terrorized everybody  
Including the selfsame Nyar Nam,  
Who had brought him wealth.  
Then Nyar Nam left for the Lake  
And the wealth followed  
With Nyamgondho in hot pursuit.  
But never did he recover anything or anybody;  
Nyar Nam and wealth disappeared in the Lake.  
Nyamgondho desired to drown in the Lake,  
Waded up to where his fortune had disappeared,  
Bent double, froze to absorb the tragedy  
And there turned into a dead tree.

'Tell me, elder, what went wrong,' said Gor.  
But the wooded face was mute and still.  
Gor hit it until it yielded once more,

'I know you grandson to Ogalo.  
You want to know everything  
That has happened and is yet to happen,  
That has been said and is yet to be said.  
Hear me then:  
Go and tell the people  
That pride is the undoing of the Ja-Luo.  
Whoever brings you prosperity  
Be she ugly or old, big or small  
Be one with her.  
Don't you let your industrious wife down.  
Don't you let the people down.'  
The face became wrinkled and moody  
But let out a few more words:  
'Go tell the people  
That deep in the Lake there's wealth  
And even what you see here is watery wealth.  
But they should know  
That the companion to Wealth is Poverty  
And the links between the two are Strife and Pride  
I, Nyamgondho wuod Ombare,  
Dead after prosperity misused  
Have spoken?'

Silence. Silence. Silence.

## **The River of Milk**

Gor moved eastward to Mirunda Beach  
Where his ancestors first camped in the land of Ramba.  
He remembered Obunga Osewe and Ologi,  
The two brothers who crossed the Lake on earthen boats.  
Here at Mirunda they extended their right hands,  
Pierced the earth with their spears and said,  
'Here on this land, we shall live!'  
They tested the soil and found it good.  
Prosperity came along  
And Obunga Osewe gave birth to Ogalo the Crumbs.  
But those they had found there:  
The Waturi and Waresia rivalled them.  
Ochanda of Waresia complained to Ogalo,  
'How can you claim Milambo for your own  
Yet your people found me here?  
We shall fight, but not with spears.  
Let us hold a milk competition

To determine who stays here.’  
Here at Mirunda Ogalo had few heads of cattle  
But Ochanda had herds and herds of cattle.

Said Ochanda, this rich man of Waresia,  
‘Let us pour milk from Nyakayiimba Hill  
And whosoever milk forms a river reaching the Lake  
Shall own this land.’

And Ochanda brought potfuls and potfuls of milk  
And poured them from the hilltop,  
But they did not flow even to the foot of the hill.  
Ogalo took just a few potfuls of milk  
Then mixed them with watery magic.  
And the milk gushed forth,  
Rushed down and ‘Bwaaa!’  
The milk poured into the Lake like River Kuja.  
And the spirits of the Lake drunk it till they were satiated.

Ogalo Mak’Osewe, nephew to the Kamreri—  
How clever he was!  
And this cleverness won the land.  
Ochanda conceded defeat saying:  
‘Father of Ogada, the earth is yours.  
I’ve left you this earth.’  
And he plucked himself from this land  
And went far away: nobody knows where.  
Later, the Kanyamwa moved up to the Escarpment,  
From where they could command the whole Ramba.

Gor knew the blood of the wise ones was in him  
So he didn’t fear to wander the land beyond Mirunda  
For all Milambo belonged to him.  
Ruma Valley teemed with wild animals and snakes  
Gor roamed it, collected animals and herbs there,  
Till the only wizard there was alarmed  
Oyamo Odidi panicked and stammered:  
‘What is Gor doing here?  
And he cannot come to greet me!  
Though I be small  
I too need respect.’

Gor had no time for a wizard  
Who killed his fellows everyday.  
So he moved on, upwards and downwards

Till he came to the Lake again  
At the mouth of Kuja River.  
Now fellows, tell me:  
Does the Kuja flood  
Without claiming victims?  
But that season folks,  
The Kuja did not kill  
Because Gor had tamed it.  
Going up the river in the boat  
Gor saw big fishes; gliding in water  
They accompanied him up the river  
Until he reached the villages  
Where the children sang:

*Gor is rowing,  
Gor is rowing  
Come and see.*

Then people realized  
That the river could be plied by boats  
And the fish caught for food.  
Gor said, 'We must be wiser.  
Strangers have come from where birds don't reach  
And here they are traversing our land and waters  
While we are confining ourselves to the villages.  
The earth is one  
But only the clever ones shall rule it.

' A time will come, oh people of Milambo  
When the test of our manhood and womanhood  
Shall be to go round the Lake as fast as possible  
And come back with fish, fresh or dried.  
There shall be no more removal of teeth,  
And no return to mutilation of our bodies  
Like the people of long, long ago.  
The earth is round, descendants of Ramogi,  
And we must go round our Lake in imitation.  
Going round this water mass  
Is our real test in life, our rough life:  
Mountains of waves and currents assail us;  
The boat is difficult to paddle.  
Beasts in the watery wilderness  
Hanker for our flesh and blood;  
We have to defend ourselves.

Witches and sorcerers, our own people,  
Cast spells so that we may drown,  
But we must stay afloat.  
Our hearts are heavy and bodies weak;  
But we must summon the fire that blazed  
In the beginning, when Jarateng' burst to life.  
Fire! Fire! Fire! Fire!  
Not even the water can extinguish it!

Four times, people chorused back, 'Fire!'  
Four times, they jumped into water  
And no beast ended their lives  
And no water extinguished their fires  
And plenty were the fish they caught  
And the water dripping from their bodies  
Irrigated the land and crops.  
Life was milk, cream and butter  
For it was wisdom that we had lacked  
And we found it in Gor Mahia.

## **A Man of the People and Family**

We had been unhappy in his absence  
So when Gor turned up, we were with him everywhere  
Fearing he might embark on his journeys again.  
There where he was, we were seeking advice,  
Reporting confusing words and discussing strange things.

For Gor the people were friends and relatives, not enemies.  
For the Kanyamwa, Gor was their beginning and future,  
The link between the ancestors and the coming generation.  
Our people, Gor was loved,  
Not because he was talkative or handsome or showy:  
He was only our true leader  
With peace on the one hand and love and justice on the other.  
For he would never allow the least of the people to be killed  
Or the least of the babies to die of disease and hunger.

When Gor was at his Sigama home  
He still yearned to go around and deliver bulls of words  
So his Mikaye Awino told him,  
'Stop it son of Ogada! Stop it!  
You will one day see your children  
Flee at your approach like a stranger.  
Stay at home and let the children know you.'



Gor replied, 'Okay my wife, I'll do as you've said.  
I'll cut back on my journeys and lead from here!'  
So Gor stayed at home to befriend and play with his children  
And to see them grow into great people of his lineage.  
Here was Awando named after the Great Ancestress.  
Here was Oswago, the eldest son, a nephew to the Kanyadoto;  
Here was Ogutu the Giant, a nephew to the Wagomba.  
Here too was Ogada Tonye, named after Gor's father.

Gor told Awando, 'A woman is so good,  
Because she builds and skirts the Ratego spirit.  
To build and to pacify is your purpose.'  
He took Oswago and Ogutu to school at Kisii and said,  
'Learn the ways and origins of the white man here.'  
Nyamunga too he took to the mission school, saying,  
'It is you who will broadcast my name.'  
Gor told Ogada in a flash of prophecy,  
'Impatience and rage might be your undoing.'

Gor taught all his children the tricks of living  
For he didn't want them to die young.  
It is true all Gor's children who listened to him died in old age  
But those who followed their own paths  
Were choked to death in their prime.

Gor had seen uncountable sunsets and sunrises,  
Droughts and famines, seasons upon seasons.  
He had seen many deaths, seen many of his age mates die  
So who knew how to live better than Gor?  
He told people to love life and skirt death and destruction.  
He told them to work for their wealth and stop envy.  
He told them to unite to fend off their enemies.

Sigama Hill always heaved with people.  
Many were those who came with difficult ailments  
But Gor would try on them every herb:  
Every root, leaf and bark until they recovered.

The herbs were grown in special gardens;  
Gor told people to grow them  
Saying that there was no better medicine  
Than that which grew out from the earth and tended by God.

Many also were people who came with problems  
That tore apart homes, villages and clans  
And Gor solved the problems caused by man and spirits.  
We the diviners, are we not blessed?  
We see the face of problems:  
We see the front and back of problems.  
We know the origins and ways of problems.  
That is why Gor said,  
'Fight poverty, our people  
For I've never seen a beast  
That spawns as many other beasts,  
A ghost that spawns as many other ghosts.  
It is poverty that creates the beast of stupidity  
And it is that beast that creates strife and death.  
It is poverty that creates the ghost of anger and blame  
And it is that ghost which brings apathy, disease and death.

'You'll remember that in our times of prosperity,  
We acquired confidence and pride;  
We attracted everybody to ourselves  
And lived in order and more prosperity.  
We were happy, helpful and peaceful.  
You'll also remember that in our time of poverty,  
We pecked on one another's bottoms like birds,  
Bewitched one another, killed one another and made noise.  
We were terrified, ill, worried and suicidal.  
And, of course, we said we had failed "Because..."  
*Thu kiragi!* Don't you say "it was because of my neighbour..."  
Study your problem like the inside of a sacrificial goat  
And solve it without casting an evil look at your neighbour. '

## The Mischiefs

In Kanyamwa people were happy;  
On Sigama Hill people rejoiced.  
But one thing Gor hated:  
The overconfidence and carelessness in his home  
For he knew that the enemies were poised to attack, always.  
He heard his wives boast that they had no problem,  
That because their husband was a magician,  
They were immune to every evil on earth.

'Your husband can take the form of animals, trees and hills,  
Do you notice this yourself?' asked a visitor.

The women said, 'People say things they like.  
To us, Gor is just a husband;  
We do not see what people talk about  
But we know we are protected by a strong *ohinga* wall.'  
The women proceeded to the garden to pluck vegetables.  
But they noticed the pumpkins were so big and ripe.  
Their yellowness was too attractive to be ignored.  
They picked the pumpkins and came back home.  
As they fetched the knives, the pumpkins disappeared.  
'Our mothers yoo !' they cried.  
'Where are our pumpkins?'

Then Gor appeared and remarked,  
'So you wanted to cook me?'

And the woman knew that Gor was not 'just a husband'.  
From that day on, it was as though everybody was  
Sworn to an oath of careful talk in Gor's home.  
Careless talk destroys homes;  
Secrets are the manure with which a family grows.  
Gor knew that many would like to see his family in graves  
So he, by playing mischief, reminded the family to be careful.

And, to be sure, the playful one  
Must also give the wives a taste of the fun.

One day, a fellow elder in Kabuoch hosted a beer party.  
Afuata wuon Ongoro sent word to Gor,  
'Fellow elder come and drink with me.'

Gor replied, 'Tell my fellow elder that I'll come early  
With my respected wife.  
So let him not embarrass me.'

The next morning Afuata was at the gate to welcome guests.  
He watched the sun riding up the sky,  
Spat in its direction and said,  
'Rise well for me, the Dazzler  
Let my party attract dignitaries in the land.'  
As he said 'dignitaries' he saw a couple of lions at the gate.  
He panicked and shouted, 'Oh lions! My people come!  
A couple of lions have overstayed in their hunt!  
Come quickly like the winking of an eye!'

People came quickly before he winked his eye,  
But found the lions turning and gracefully fleeing,  
Gracefully waving their manes as in a dance.  
When the people pursued them,  
The lions turned into two giant bees.  
As they jerked off twigs from trees to kill them,  
A deep voice rang,  
'Would you rather kill your elders?' and they fell back.

Gor and Awino materialized from the bees.  
Gor said in fury,  
'Go and tell wuon Ongoro that he's really embarrassed me.  
How can he chase me away when he himself invited me?  
And in the company of my respected Mikaye Awino?'

Back at home, Afuata was unhappy.  
'What kind of party is this  
That is first attended by beasts?'  
When word of what had happened reached him,  
He said, 'Go! Rush and call that son of Ogada!  
How I wronged my fellow elder!'  
But Gor had gone back to Sigama  
Never did he return to Kabuoch,  
But his fame spread everywhere  
And he was known as 'Mahia, the Number One Magician'.

People came from all the corners of the world to consult Gor,  
Others to wait for a scene to satisfy their curiosity.  
But such people could not see Gor change into anything;  
For Gor was not an entertainer.  
But people could not just cut any tree,  
Raise a spear against any animal  
For Gor was in every tree and animal.  
So in those days of Gor grandson to Ogalo  
The denizens of the forests and villages,  
The trees as well as animals enjoyed their full life.  
The landscapes were left intact.  
Nobody would destroy life  
For Gor was in every life.  
Nobody would destroy the land  
For fear of offending Gor.

## **The Ship With No Mates**

The District Commissioner, Omtidi, came to Sigama

And seeing that Gor was busy with everybody,  
Treating, advising and discussing with them, he wrote,  
'Gore has great power over the Jaluo.  
He particularly has great power in Milambo, the South  
And—give the devil his due—he uses it sensibly too.  
But he is old and has not the energy necessary  
For the demanding post of Paramount Chief.'

The white man said Gor was old:  
Was Gor being told to fold his seat and retire to bed?  
But no Lord had chosen him to be the chief.  
So years passed and he was still the Chief.  
And when he considered the ancient saying  
That even fashions are passed on  
And began to train his son Oswago to take over,  
The white man came to him, out of breath,  
'Gore, son of Ogada! Please help!  
Oh Paramount Chief, help!'  
There is war!'

Ai, kinsmen were at war!  
They were not using sticks, as kinsmen should,  
But were instead using guns, bombs, words...  
Ai the whiteman's war is bad!

The war between the British and the Germans  
Made the British to ask Gor for help.  
They were losing the war to the Germans  
Who were pushing on from the neighbouring Tanganyika.  
Though he had retired Gor in his heart,  
Omtidi, together with his generals, pleaded with Gor,  
'Son of Ogada, help us solve this problem  
Between us and our warlike kinsmen.'

Gor pitied them; he pitied the British  
So he took a black bull with a white spot on its head,  
Put it before him with the head facing the Lake.  
Took the white man's gun,  
Aimed at the white patch and pulled the trigger.  
The bull revolved on its legs thousands of times,  
Stopped and fell down with its head facing the Lake.  
It was all over as Gor handed back the gun.  
'This kinsman of yours is not a problem,' said Gor.  
'From across the Lake he will come

And across the Lake he shall flee.  
I can see him on his way back across the Lake  
Even as you put him to route.'

Then son of Ogada called Omtidi to his *abila* and said,  
'I see that you too disagree, only too vastly and violently.  
Shall we then occupy your land?'

But Omtidi said, 'Please let's organize for war first,  
Then we can talk later.'

Gor pitied him the more and said, 'Alright,  
This kinsman of yours is coming in a hurry and fury  
To take over where you once fought Ougo and other warriors.  
Sori is gone and so might our place here.  
But I'll help you recapture the lost territories  
And defend the remaining ones.  
Now when the enemy tears across the savannah  
Like a raging bull buffalo  
Don't you ever stop him at first.  
Let him celebrate his seeming victory and relax his muscles.  
Just retreat to Kisii and to Kindu Kanyasoro,  
Mobilise your soldiers in Kisumu, Mumiasland and Kisii,  
Advance when you're ready and we shall join you here.  
You'll see the enemy fall backward on his buttocks,  
Raising up his arms in anguish and washing you in pleas  
I, grandson to Ogalo, have spoken.'

The white man was writing in his small book  
So Gor said firmly,  
'Don't you keep what I say in that cave!  
Do something sir!'  
So the white man did as he had been told  
And the Germans were beaten at Sori.  
As they fled in their ship, a ball of fire was released—  
From the Kanyamwa escarpment, the missile flew to the Lake  
And the ship tumbled, drowned and rot  
And turned into something else.  
There at Sori Bay, the ship is still lying in the deeps.  
On the bed of the Lake,  
It desires for occupancy other than that of the water.  
Ae Gor, can't a ship have its mates?

The white man sighed and puzzled out the situation,

'So these African things work!' he said as he reached Gor's.  
'Had you been a younger Chief,' he told Gor  
'I'd have made you Chief of the whole world.  
I'd have made you the successor to the King!'

But Gor's elders said,  
'Gor rules the whole earth!  
Go anywhere on this earth  
And ask whether Gor is known there.  
Tell the people Gor is visiting them  
And they'll start preparing like the King is coming.'

Omtidi in amazement wrote down,  
'Although Gore is old, he's much feared as a magician  
Even by people who hold no superstitious beliefs.'

So Gor's name became a shield.  
If you went into enemy territory and were threatened  
You'd simply say you were a friend or relative of Gor  
And you'd be spared and even welcomed.  
Aha that fame of Gor...  
And the fear of Gor Mahia—  
All the people of the earth shared in them.  
Wherever you went, people would point you out and say,  
'Behold that's a kinsman of Gor.  
Leave him in peace,  
If peace you love.'

## **Carrier of Gun and Staff**

The people were happy; the white man was happy.  
But Gor was not happy;  
Perhaps he had stopped the war too soon?  
But if the lords had been left to fight themselves to death,  
It would be on the Karungu and Kanyamwa soil;  
It would have been the black man to die  
For the white man's victory or defeat.

The colonialist had carried himself  
Like the *Ogaye* peacemaker for too long  
To worry about the Ratego war spirit in him.  
He had carried himself with righteousness for too long  
To worry about his own wrongs.  
After the war, he celebrated  
By sitting more heavily on the black man—

Whipping him, looting his goods,  
Yoking him to labour...  
What a misdemeanour for the righteous one  
To do unto others only evil!

The District Commissioner surveyed the land,  
Pointed out where sugar-cane should be grown,  
And where cotton and groundnuts should be planted.  
And he said the natives who were still at home  
Should take up tools and work.  
And he wrote down in his journal,  
'You have to whip these men:  
They have the strength of donkeys,  
But like donkeys, they use it sparingly.  
Use the stick and dangle no carrot!'

Omtidi came to Milambo and told Gor,  
'This black soil is good for sugar-cane;  
The climate is also good for coffee,  
But my people fear to come here,  
Perhaps because it is in the middle of nowhere  
And they already have better places to farm.'

He looked at his journal and noticed an asterisk,  
'One thing I've not asked you is:  
Why did you stun that poor bull  
With a single shot on its head?'  
The white man came to Gor in that inquisitive attitude  
Expecting to know more about his magical art  
And of course to get entertained,  
But without being bewitched.

Gor took up the gun the white man had given him,  
Resolutely he said, 'Instead of blowing up your head,  
I shot at the white patch of the bull's head.  
And the head has shown you the way—across the seas.  
Hobley once told me that you are peaceful and civilised  
And that that's why you took up our land.  
Now we have seen that you love war like bees,  
And love to make slaves out of the whole world.  
So you must leave our land.  
The Germans have followed the bull's head  
And you too must do the same.'



The District Commissioner left  
Undecided on whether to call Gor treasonable  
Though an amiable, curious old man he was.

So Gor's fame spread;  
When the colonialists later left this country  
In a huff and prophesying doom,  
People remembered Gor's words and deeds.

Gor knew that his time with the white man would end,  
But his time with the people would never;  
So he treated all those with ailments, worries, and wounds;  
So he talked with those who had words for comparison  
And his family got more and more attention:  
He would forever be with Awino and the children  
Till they too knew that Gor was forever there in their midst.

Gor knew that the wind would blow away his spirit  
And the earth would swallow his body  
But his service to the people would never end.  
So he called his eldest son, Oswago and said,  
'Oswago yoo !  
You're the one who'll next carry the staff.  
Carry the staff knowing that it belongs to your ancestors  
But not to the white man!  
And your ancestors are the ancestors of your people too.  
Respect the ancestors and the people.'

The white man at last brought sugar-cane seedlings and said,  
'Grow this plant; it is sweet; you will like it.'  
And he drew the chief aside and gave him a whip,  
'Don't you keep this hippo-hide whip away;  
Use it on the hides of your men.'

Gor urged the people to grow sugar-cane, saying,  
'If there is good in it, we shall benefit.  
If not, we shall abandon it.'  
And his son, Oswago, left school to supervise the cultivation  
As Gor was too busy doing other things.

Oswago ka Gor danced:  
He could see himself taking over from his father.  
The glory would not leave the homestead of Ogalo;  
To be sure, the word was intact:

The land would never run short of heroes;  
And the next hero would be him:  
Oswago ka Gor.

Oswago possessed the gun;  
Now this young man was not like his father.  
He thought he was 'the Chief with the Gun,'  
Carrying the gun in his right hand and the staff in his left.  
He walked around with the gun and the whip  
Forcing people to break their backs on sugar-cane plantations.  
And his father told him,  
'Slow down my son!  
You're not yet the Chief  
But you'll take over from me.  
So learn how to work with the people.'

But Oswago retorted,  
'Slow down, father!  
Your days are gone!  
You are too old!'

'So I'm old?' asked Gor in fury.  
But he was caught up in worries  
For Oswago was his eldest and most beloved son.  
The other sons were still young, going to school in Kisii.  
If Oswago were not there, who would carry the chiefly staff?  
People were talking badly of Oswago  
And they said that it was not fitting  
For one whose father had been accused of killing Odera Ulalo  
To carry out persecutions of his own people.

One day, Oswago was whipping people at the plantations.  
This foolish one was persecuting people on Awach River  
And he whipped Owuoth, a man as old as Gor  
And a friend to Oswago's mother from her girlhood days.  
Owuoth was mad, bitter and depressed.  
He set about packing his possessions to move to Kadem  
But the old man loved his land;  
He could not make the first step  
To go and live in 'a foreign land of strange kinsmen'.

Gor summoned his son and cried out,  
'Oswago oh! You won't prosper!  
Is this not your mother's friend you've whipped?'

'Father,' said Oswago gravely,  
'Perhaps you don't know the white man.  
The white man's law has to be obeyed  
Even by proud old men like Owuoth.  
We cannot be lenient with stubborn old men!'

'Alright!' said Gor and he wept for his son.

Old Owuoth died,  
Undecided on whether to leave his motherland or not,  
Gravely depressed and contemplating suicide,  
And the burial ceremonies followed like the death's shadow.  
The *tugo* ceremony was to be held the following day  
And people practised with spears for war dances,  
Tested their voices for war cries  
And set to enact the history of the land and Owuoth's life.  
And Oswago also prepared with his gun  
To join in the ceremony.

Gor summoned Oswago and told him,  
'My son, you know Owuoth's death came from you  
And tomorrow people will play at his funeral.  
Don't you ever go there yourself  
Because the dead see and rage.'

Oswago rolled his eyes and turned on his father saying,  
'Are you already senile, father?  
How can I miss such a great ceremony?'

And so Oswago took the gun;  
In the company of spear-wielding warriors,  
He ran to the wilderness at Loo-ogik:  
From here where the Kanyamwa once made a last stand,  
The warriors enacted how the Kanyamwa, under a new leader,  
Fought their way back home, putting the enemy to rout.  
From there at Loo-ogik, the warriors danced in mock fights  
And raised their voices in war songs.  
On the way home from Loo-ogik, Oswago did not fire a shot;  
He knew when to put his gun to good use.

The women ululated; cattle were driven dangerously,  
Spears were thrown into the air,  
Shields were bandied about.

The *tugo* had reached home.

Aha, the spear must be thrown into the air to pierce the sky!  
And you must be keen to grab it in the air  
Before it falls on the ground.  
But the gun, our people,  
The gun releases fire into the air  
While it remains firmly in the hand.

The time came for the son of Gor to show off.  
Oswago aimed high at the sky.  
Was Oswago going to hit the sky?  
No! There was utter commotion....  
The bullet missed the sky and hit the *ohinga* stone wall.  
Aye! The *ohinga* wall that used to protect us from enemies!  
A splinter from the stone bounced back, hit Oswago's groin  
And down he went with the gun in his hand.  
He was carried to his father's home.  
But he didn't survive the night;  
His death was announced by screams of his wives at midnight.

Death occurred at Gor's.  
People, Gor had foreseen the death,  
But he was not prepared for it.  
How could he when he had established a home  
In which he had kept death at bay?  
Did he know that death would be lurking there  
Silently wooing a victim to marry?  
Our people, Oswago had beckoned Death to Gor's homestead.  
All the time, Gor thought, thought and thought  
Till brain boiled in his head,  
Till his heart heated up and cooled  
And he summoned elders from all the horns of the land.  
'My son has left behind two wives and children,  
Without having established a homestead of his own.  
Fellow elders, I've looked around  
But found no one has died in similar circumstances.  
As our people say, the size of a ram's tail  
Can only be compared with another's.  
This tragedy has no precedent,  
To compare its magnitude with.'

The elders put their heads together,  
Put their words together until there was only one word:

On the day the widows were to be remarried  
The towers of their houses must be broken at dawn  
Before the witnesses to the ceremony arrive.

And so it happened that the wise men came together  
And sought wisdom from each other.  
This is what Ogalo the Crumbs had said:  
That the crumbs of wisdom must be put together,  
All the words must be gathered and used  
For the benefit of all the generations:  
Past, present and future.  
And those who put words together must have good words  
Inherited from sages of the past and present  
And those that sages of the future are anticipated to say.  
Our people, Gor was wise, but there are instances  
When the wisdom of one person  
Is like a single cooking stone that supports no pot.

## The Succession

Soil shrunk and flattened,  
Grass grew and a single tree sprouted on Oswago's grave  
And Oswago's family prospered,  
Saved by his father's wisdom.  
Only that Oswago had died so young  
Leaving so many things undone and unfinished,  
Leaving Gor with no one to take over from him.  
The Luos say that it's the most loved *nyabondo* harp  
That's soon cut by the rat.  
And Gor wondered at the accuracy of the proverb.

The white man came and found Gor grieving  
And Gor told him that his son had died of dysentery.

The white man said he wanted a young chief,  
For the son of Ogada had worked well for so long.  
And Gor said it was alright as he also wanted a successor.  
Being too long at something caused a mother misfortune.  
Kiroro's mother had been too long in the water fishing  
When Turtle came and clawed her private parts.

Gor had sons, but they were too young;  
Being too long in exile had wasted Gor's years.  
He had Ogutu Raruoch and Nyamunga:  
Both were going to school in Kisii.

So people said that the staff was leaving Ogalo's family  
And a young, distinguished man called Lore Omuya  
Was whispered as the possible successor to Gor.

Lore came to Gor, inquired into the vacant seat and was told,  
'Son of Omuya, the seat is yours:  
The people have said so and the women like you.'

Gor summoned the elders and talked with them saying,  
'In Ogalo's homestead are people: men and women.  
Our lineage is the one that provides chiefs.  
How then can we transfer the staff to another lineage?  
How can we break with our age-old tradition?'  
Gor went to Kisii and brought his giant son, Ogutu Raruoch.  
He brought him before the elders and said,  
'I've brought this lad back from Kisii.  
Nyamunga can learn the white man's wisdom on our behalf  
But elect for me this lad, this nephew to the Kamot.'

Lore talked with all the youth and all the women,  
But not with the elders.  
The elders said Lore Omuya was not fit to lead them.  
'We are the ones who together with him will lead.  
If we are not one with him, how will he lead?'  
The elections came and then the results:  
Ogutu the Giant was the Chief.

Lore was crestfallen and came to cry before Gor.  
Gor comforted him, saying,  
'Son of Omuya, I liked you  
And I chose you.  
But those you were to work with rejected you.  
Oh son of Omuya, the elders rejected you  
And there's nothing I can do for you.'

When the white man came back, he wrote down in his book:  
'Ogutu s/o Gor was elected chief of Kanyamwa.  
It was a foregone conclusion that a son of Gor  
Would be chosen; this is the only family in the District  
With any real hereditary claims to chieftainship.'

The *Okoche* trooped to Kanyamwa,  
To eat meat and pick bones clean;  
The colonialist demanded cattle to feast on

And people to enslave in plantations  
And men to cook for him in his kitchen,  
His wife being too clean to touch utensils!

Gor called Ogutu and said:

‘In this world, nephew to the Kamot,  
The only genuine friends I’ve had have been the people.  
Whatever I’ve done has been to help them.  
That’s why nobody hates me  
Except the haters of the people.  
You know son; you’ll outlive your mother and me;  
Then you’ll be your own father and mother,  
Then the problems of fathers and mothers,  
Kinsmen and friends, sisters and brothers  
Will come upon you like hunters keen on their quarry.  
Then is the time to be friends  
With those you’d like to distance yourself from  
And time to be cautious  
With those who edge themselves closer to you.  
You know, Ogutu, it was the desire  
To be friendly with those who pose as genuine friends  
And the desire to be above the people  
That killed Odera Ulalo and your brother Oswago.  
But let nobody cheat you, fellow countryman,  
That you’re better than the least of these people;  
You’re just one of them.  
To have a job well done is our character,  
But this job given to us by the white man is bad  
The best way to do it is to do it badly:  
Protect the people and defend the land.  
That is the job given to us by the ancestors.  
Remember son, that we were chiefs  
Even before the white man became the chief of the world.’

So Ogutu was to be the white man’s chief  
But he was the people’s leader.  
The white man didn’t like it:  
The District Commissioner retched, gesticulated,  
Shook his fists and wrote down,  
‘Ogutu does not strike me as being very efficient  
He is too retiring and is probably much overshadowed  
By the personality of his father who is now old  
But was formerly a powerful man feared for his magic.  
Ogutu appears to be popular with his people

But is inclined to be slack about obeying orders.  
It is unfortunate that Gor's sons are all rotten!'

In those days, Gor son of Ogada's fame was even greater.  
There at Sigama, he would receive guests of all kinds—  
A patient would come and complain of stomach pains  
And claim it was all the work of neighbours.  
Gor would turn into nothing, get the neighbours  
And in an instant there would be a meeting.  
Counselling and reconciliation would take place,  
For Gor knew that no medicine would work well  
If the cause of the ailment was not eliminated.

Gor would say,  
'Neighbours do cast evil eyes on each other,  
But the main cause of stomach pains and head-aches  
Are the ill-will and quarrels among the people.  
Is it too hard, people of our land,  
To say good luck and do your neighbour a good turn?  
Why can't neighbours in their hostilities pause and say,  
'Let us stop it! We shall need each other?''

The hostilities and diseases would then end  
And a new crop of enemies would come  
And Gor would make them friends.  
The hostilities and friendships were like seasons  
Alternating and causing miseries or joy.  
With nobody to manage them, they could cause havoc  
Especially in the family which was most vulnerable  
To quarrels, complaints, evil eyes and mischief.  
A sleeping family would find itself torn to pieces  
Or gone adrift in the tornado of words and fights.  
Ae the tornado leaves nothing in its wake  
Except the rabble and ashes of a once prosperous family!  
And Gor was the Tornado that destroyed tornadoes.  
He was there in Kanyamwa protecting homes and the land.

## The Unending Sleep

As the wind blew over Ruma Valley,  
It carried Gor Mahia's fame and fortunes to Oyamo Odidi.  
Oyamo heard that Gor Mahia was the leader of Milambo,  
That magicians went to him to concede defeat,  
That Gor was now the Number One Magician in the world.  
Oyamo Odidi retched, gesticulated and asked, 'How?'



He brought his staff down and said,  
'This cannot be!'  
He was bitter about the way Gor had always treated him:  
Avoiding him like a leper  
And infringing on his territory with impunity.  
'Hell know that I too exist,' he said.  
'I am Oyamo, named after the winds that harbour plagues—  
A disease is ignored until it catches a victim.  
I am Odidi, named after the small bird.  
Well Gor thinks I'm small, but can't I kill?  
Ae Odidi!  
The *odidi* bird is small, but still serves as food.  
Even if ten people share it, they still will treat it as food.  
Who's this Gor to ignore me,  
Oyamo Odidi, the Plague and the Food?'

Then Oyamo Odidi set about work, casting cowries about.  
'I hate those who slight me,' he said  
Fondling his cowries one by one.  
'I'm short and small  
And that's why I'm hated by the tall and big Luos.  
But don't the selfsame Luos say  
That being small is not a disease?  
So why then does Gor treat me as though I'm a disease?'

So Oyamo schemed on how to finish Gor Mahia  
Just because he wanted to be seen as existing.  
He visited Gor and asked for forgiveness of wrongs if any.  
He brought along with him gifts—  
These had already been bewitched.  
But Gor was too powerful  
To even feel the witchcraft of this plague-causing man;  
Not even his dog was affected by the witchcraft.

Oyamo kept on trying to finish Gor, but to no avail.  
Then he invited him to his home in Ruma:  
'Fellow elder,' he said,  
'Come so that I may slaughter you a bull.  
Good is the elder who knows where his fellow lives.'

People told Gor that he should not be a friend to a sorcerer  
Who had killed everybody around him.  
Ruma was a large wilderness, teeming with wild animals,  
But only Oyamo lived there with his family.

Gor said he wanted none of Oyamo's sorcery.  
Only he wanted to study it to save the lives it targeted.

Accompanied by Awino, Ogalo Nyaguga and others,  
Gor set off from the top of the escarpment;  
They watched the Valley which was also a plain:  
Elephants trumpeted, the *omoro* antelope gracefully grazed,  
Lions yawned loudly as giraffes craned their necks.  
The journey was fast as the party went down the Escarpment,  
Along the Kor-lang'o Path.  
But it was not the flight to which the Kwabwai had put them  
During the reign of Ong'ondo the Old One.  
Toiliyo trotted to and fro, sniffed here and there,  
Barking and cleaning the path for Gor and his entourage.  
Never was a dog so loved by its master;  
Never was a dog so dutiful to its master.

Gor rolled down the valley like a log,  
Flew down the valley like a flock of birds  
And blew the tree tops like a whirlwind  
Until Oyamo Odidi remarked in his Ruma home,  
'I, Odidi, the small bird that serves kings,  
Could I have taken more than I can swallow?'

Oyamo was preparing food for the guests himself:  
It was a dog,  
Its skin wisely stashed in the *widhi* ceiling.  
'Distinguished food for a distinguished guest,' he mused.  
'This is going to be a feast such as he has never tasted!'  
Oyamo was cooking food he knew to be taboo to our people.  
In which land had one eaten a dog and survived?  
But Oyamo was happy cutting up small pieces of dog meat  
And cooking each in a magically special way.  
This was the food that had taken weeks to prepare,  
The food that could not be cooked wholly.  
It was food prepared by Oyamo Odidi the sorcerer.

'I'm Oyamo Odidi of the winds,'  
Said he as he felt Gor Mahia approaching.  
Gor Mahia's whirlwind was blowing furiously in his home.  
Oyamo prepared the last pieces of dog meat,  
Cut up snails and herbs as spices,  
Sprayed juices and ashes onto the food.  
Then he chose a fat bull

Cut off its head and hanged it on a tree  
Just to deceive the guests about the meal.  
Actually, the bull's meat was what his family would eat  
And the guests would gobble up the dog meat.

When he smelled Gor Mahia in the vicinity,  
Oyamo told his wife:  
'When the guests arrive, you know how to serve them?'  
And the witch knew so much how to serve meals;  
So she cast a special evil eye on the guests' food;  
It would rot and turn into worms inside the guests' stomachs.  
What a woman!

When the guests arrived, Oyamo boasted to them:  
'I am Oyamo Odidi, the Plague and the Food.  
Just look at my trees and see what is there.'  
And there where the guests looked  
Was a fat head of bull of bulls.  
'And should you not be satisfied at the end of the feast,'  
Continued Oyamo pacing up and down,  
'Look at my herds of cattle, point out any beast you like  
And I'll have it slaughtered for you.  
But I know you people of Kanyamwa,  
Even though you be tall and big  
Your stomachs are as small as rats' bladders.'  
That was Oyamo's way of challenging the guests  
To clear the food as fast as possible.  
He wanted Gor to die as fast as possible  
So that he could be the champion in the land.

Our people, Gor had eyes  
Which saw where others were blind.  
The one with glowing eyes,  
Set the meal before the guests.  
The soup was sparkling like a thousand tiny stars on the plate;  
Its smell and beauty invited lots of saliva in the mouths;  
The saliva threatened to pour out of the guests' mouths  
Like torrential rains that cause flash floods.  
*Thu kiragi!* Away with floods!

The guests felt frustrated by the etiquette:  
They had to exercise control  
Lest they pounce on the food like hyaenas.  
But Gor kept calm and listened to his dog.

It was barking, looking pitifully at the food.  
Everybody thought Tioliyo had overstepped its bounds  
By being too eager for the delicious-looking food.  
But when it was given a piece of meat,  
It continued looking at it pitifully.  
Then the people said the dog was like its master;  
Given to inspecting food before eating it.

A child was brought to eat with the guests;  
He would ostensibly share the food with the guests  
But would actually be eating from a different dish  
Since he came with a piece of meat in his hands.  
Flapping about like a butterfly,  
The woman with the glowing eyes said,  
'Yaye ! The child usually eats from his hands, good mother.'  
Awino had asked her to explain why the child  
Should use his hands as dish and plate.

Ogalo Nyaguga was so impatient,  
So wide-eyed was he looking at the food  
And his mouth was so full of saliva he couldn't talk.  
He was the first to pinch off a chunk of *kuon*  
And dip it in the sparkling soup.  
Gor grabbed his hands in mid air,  
Shook the *kuon* off his hands  
Just as Ogalo's tongue was sticking out to collect it.  
'Slow down,' said Gor coolly.  
'When the food looks so delicious,  
There's something inedible in it.'

Then the grandson to Ogalo set about work:  
He put a lump of *kuon* in the soup  
And whistled, 'Saa sa! Saa sa!'  
Lo! The dishes upturned, the soup splashed about  
And a dog gathered itself from the pieces,  
Looked around, panicked, barked and made for the door.  
The dog fled like it was freed from a snare;  
It speeded up the valley and disappeared.  
Gor was the god that saved it from eager teeth and stomachs;  
Gor too was the god that saved his clansmen from death.  
Ogalo Nyaguga's saliva dried in his mouth  
And like a falling star, everybody's appetite waned,  
For there before them, the spilt soup was smelling  
And worms were crawling about, swimming in it.

The visit came to an end among quarrels and accusations:  
The guests were shocked by the content of the meal.  
The Oyamo family said it was mischief that had been done  
To spoil a well-intended party and long-prepared meal.  
Oyamo Odidi was too ashamed  
And disappointed to see his guests off;  
He had escaped from the scene  
To hide in the grove of his wizardry.

Gor told the Oyamo family,  
‘Tell Oyamo that I came here as a friend,  
But I’m leaving as an enemy.’  
He turned to his people and said, ‘Let’s go!’

There in the grove, Oyamo took four days, thinking;  
He spent the nights in a cave all the time crying,  
‘This man Gor, how shall I kill him?’  
Then he caught his head, covering it with his large palms  
So that no thoughts, useful as they would be, would escape it.  
Oyamo thought so hard that he could hear his skull crack.  
Then he arose, went deep into the jungle,  
Cast a spell on the elephants  
And directed the herds towards Kanyamwa.

Nightfall found the elephants plodding through the bushes,  
Trudging up the Escarpment with no pause;  
So strong was the spell they could not sniff,  
Let alone eat the bushes.  
So when they reached Kanyamwa at midnight,  
They were so hungry that if there were no vegetation  
They would have eaten anything, even soil!  
But Kanyamwa has always been the female land:  
A land so fertile grasses grow to the height of roofs  
And crops grow even on beaten paths  
And people had so worked on the land:  
Sorghum, the size of human head, was ready;  
Pumpkins and potatoes, the size of beer pots, were ready.  
Simsim and millet were dancing in the midnight breeze.

The Kanyamwa birds sleep, but are always alert:  
They fluttered their wings and cried in sudden flight:  
The ground groaned as animals stampeded in fright.

People of our land, the beast marauders had arrived.  
Later on, the Kanyamwa people were to sing,

*The wind blowing from Ruma  
Oh that wind!  
It brought beasts that like humans fast  
Oh what beasts!  
Like humans they feast!  
Oh those beasts!  
The night was dark  
When the proboscis licked the land  
And at daybreak the land lay naked  
At daybreak the land lay naked in shame!*

Our people, others have done us evil.  
Had it not been for Gor, we would all have perished.  
Gor cast a spell on rats:  
Into the agile trunks the rodents trooped,  
Nibbled at them and the beasts turned mad.  
The big beasts are only afraid of the small ones.  
The elephants fled wildly towards Ruma.  
Aha what a stampede!  
They trumpeted, crashed on trees, tripped on each other  
Till they reached Ruma, the domain of Oyamo Odidi.  
Everything was utterly, utterly destroyed in Ruma  
As the beasts went on the rampage.

‘This man Gor, how shall I kill him?’ said Oyamo.  
He was in his cave hide-out with all his family  
To escape the wrath of beasts with tickling trunks.

Finishing Gor defeated Oyamo Odidi  
So he invoked the spirit Oyamo after whom he’d been named  
And the spirit blew a disease over Kanyamwa  
Till everybody was ill, sleeping and dying.  
The elders said,  
‘This illness must be transferred to its initiator!’  
But Gor said, ‘No, the illness must be eliminated!’  
And so it was eliminated.  
But Oyamo was not sleeping:  
He sneaked into Kanyamwa, urinated a diseased urine  
Till it flooded Kanyamwa and the elders said,  
‘*Tho!* We’re tired of Oyamo the Plague.  
Why can’t he be put to permanent sleep?’

Gor did not put Oyamo to permanent sleep,  
But made him sleepy all the time.  
The sleeping sickness is what Oyamo had caused  
And so Gor gave it back to him  
So he could not make evil designs;  
So he could serve as an example to other sorcerers.

That is how sleeping sickness came to Ruma.  
It was Oyamo who had caused it  
And Gor wanted it to make the evil Oyamo sleepy,  
But unfortunately, others in Ruma contracted the disease too.

Now Oyamo was ever sleepy:  
He would walk and fall  
And there on the ground,  
He would sleep like a baby in its mother's arms.  
He would start talking  
And stop in mid speech to take a nap.  
He would start thinking  
And before his skull would crack with an idea,  
He would be snoring  
Like the proverbially empty-headed ja-Wasio.  
So he was renamed Oyamo the Sleepy:  
The one who'd always be heard saying,  
'This man Gor...'  
And before he could ask, 'How shall I kill him?'  
He would be in a deep, dreamless sleep  
And the one with glowing eyes would tap his head with a rod,  
Pour pots and pots of cold water on him,  
But like the boulder of Lwanda Magere, he would not move.  
Then the people of Ruma, happy that the sorcerer was dying  
Would sing and dance, in their new-found respite;  
They would mimic Oyamo Odidi in song:

*This man Gor...*

*How shall I night-run in his home asleep?*

*How shall I slaughter him a dog in my sleep?*

*How shall I cast an evil eye on his food in my sleep?*

It was great fun watching Oyamo  
Trying to keep awake even as he slept.  
These days, people go to Ruma to watch wild animals  
But in those days, people went to Ruma to watch Oyamo.

# The Relay Game

Our people,  
Dawns are more than the fleece of sheep in abundance,  
But so are the sunsets, seasons and the Nyametho comet years.  
Gor counted days until the counting sticks filled up a house  
And he didn't want to count anymore.  
He knew that whatever man did, he would stop  
But to his young ones he handed over the sticks and said,  
'Everything is a relay game.  
Let the counting be yours,  
Let the proper living be yours,  
Let the medication and counselling be yours.'

Gor gave wisdom to his sons and daughters  
And to everybody who would come to him  
He told 'the relay game' story.  
He told them the wisdom of passing on the word  
And of gathering and comparing words.

'We are followers of footprints,' he said.  
'Bygone generations are our masters,  
Yet we have to look above their footprints  
To see where they lead us  
And cover them fast with dust  
If to our death they lead.  
We too are the masters of future generations,  
So to beat a new path is our task.  
But to the coming generations, I say:  
Don't follow our footprints  
If they don't suit your times,  
If they lead to a wilderness of madness:  
Cover then fast with dust  
Or let them just fade away.'

The people understood the word,  
Yet were too lax to practice it,  
For they leant on customs and traditions,  
Even though some originated from madness.  
Their lives had just been too good.

Gor was worried,  
People might not prosper after he died.  
So he thought and thought,  
Till he summoned his family and said,



'You see people of my homestead,  
My agemates are dead—  
Those still alive are stuck to chairs and beds  
Like dead things.  
They are living with the ancestors already  
Though their bodies are still here:  
Deaf, dumb and paralysed.  
So give me your ears generously.

'He who lives well is he  
Who keeps the chosen seeds of the last harvest  
And chooses the right season to plant them.  
He who lives well is he  
Who separates the good seed  
From the rotten ones  
And plants in time.  
We live in times when quacks can pass as true leaders.  
You saw what happened when deception overwhelmed us:  
We fell to the spell of the Ratego spirit:  
We gnashed our teeth and ate crusts from our noses.  
Yet we said we were helpless,  
"Because the Rategos were too strong!"  
Let all live straight and fight "because";  
Don't you give excuses:  
Don't you be a people whose purpose is to blame,  
Whose purpose is to sing "because";  
You can prosper even if there is a "because" against you.

'Remember our purpose in this world:  
We were born to collect fragments and preserve life,  
This is our purpose:  
To live well and to print clean feet in the soil.

'Dawns are many and so are the sunsets;  
But he is great who peeps into the coming dawn  
And looks back at the last sunset with questions.

'Now, you'll bury my bones, but keep my words.

'When I die, let the people work and eat their supper.  
Only then will you allow the women  
To announce my death with ululation.

'Play the next day, as is our custom:

Enact my birth, my youth, my old age;  
Enact all my life and all our lives  
And the *tugo* will be good.

‘Don’t you be too much engaged with my death:  
With descendants and a story left behind I cannot die.

‘I can see the fools of the future generation  
Setting aside everything, including life itself, just to mourn  
And spending everything just to entertain pretender-mourners.  
Aha! The foolish generation of the undecided future  
Will be too much in love with death to live on this earth.  
They will treat corpses like kings,  
But the living like rats.  
Then death will camp at their homesteads  
Till they learn to hate it and drive it off.  
For death, like life,  
Loves the place where it is given special treatment.

‘The future generation will love death so much  
They will not celebrate birth as we do;  
They will not celebrate marriage as we do;  
They will only celebrate death.  
A culture that revolves around death  
Can only nurture disease and death.

‘People of my homestead,  
You must love life  
And hate death in all its forms.  
For death is like the confidence ogre  
Who comes to you as a blessing and a saviour,  
A prophet or a peacemaker,  
But mostly, it comes in the gleaming things of life.

‘In my *tugo* and *tero buru* burial ceremonies,  
Chase away death and evil beyond the horns of the earth,  
To the deeps from where they won’t arise,  
Drown them all.

‘It’s man who turns into death and evil spirit;  
It’s man who tames death and eliminates evil.’

When the Great Elder talked like that,  
People said he had smelled death

And they began to weep  
For they were not prepared for Mahia's death.  
The family was simmering with strife;  
The land was riddled with corruption,  
Only Gor could check it.  
Everybody looked up to him for the survival of the land  
But the grandson to Ogalo told them,  
'It is what is inside you,  
It is what is inside your skull  
That can destroy or make each and everyone of you.  
If you bring out the good inside you, it will make you;  
If you keep the good inside you, it will destroy you.  
Fellow citizens of Milambo,  
All those who have been destroyed  
Are those who've bottled up their ambitions  
Or those who've brought out only the bad in them.'

He urged them,  
'You must learn to stand on your own,  
Even if you fall at first,  
March on!  
A child learns to stand by falling.  
Don't you be people who make peace with failure;  
Don't you be people who fall in love with poverty.  
Prosperity has come our way  
And do not let it go  
For the wise ones are gone and I too will go  
Only you will remain.'

Gone too were those who had rivalled him—  
Those who had said he was a quack.  
Gone too were his fellow chiefs and magicians—  
Those who had chosen to be fragments.

The sleeping Oyamo had suddenly disappeared  
Probably into the belly of a wild animal  
After being humiliated by people  
And abandoned by his family.  
And Gor cried for those days of rivals and playmates.  
For although they were risky and busy,  
They were never boring or lonely.

He dreamt of a peer for a pastime  
Until one day, he got one.

A man his age visited him, saying,  
'Fellow elder, it is not a light matter  
That has made me embark on such a long journey  
Across lands and the Lake.  
Son of Ogada I grabbed my rod,  
Long abandoned by my bedside—  
I've been bedridden for years—  
And I said, "I must gather my energy;  
Only seeing him will immortalize our race."  
And here I am with God's life.  
Fellow elder, our days are gone  
So it's our progeny for whose life we're fighting.  
I can see this your family falling to pieces  
Like a dry lump of loam soil on a rock  
Immediately you die.'

Gor pretended that he had not understood,  
'I don't see anything the matter with my family.'

'Son of Ogada,' said the visitor,  
'Even though you're holding out,  
The prospering of your family will not outlive you.  
I see your family dying out like a falling star—  
Bright this instant and dead in the next.  
But I can treat you  
So that your family may prosper forever  
And your name will forever be remembered?'

'Treat me then,' Gor conceded.

The visitor set about work.  
He went around and found a *riwo* anthill,  
Red and favourite of wild animals for testing their horns.  
The visitor dug a tunnel through the anthill.  
'Bring a pole and carry it through the tunnel,  
Let your wives help you carry it;  
Your Mikaye Awino should be next to you  
And each wife will help carry it up to the other end  
In the order in which they were married.'

When Gor and Awino had emerged at the other end  
And the other women had not even passed through the tunnel,  
The visitor beamed with joy and announced triumphantly,  
'I've finished my work!'

And he asked for a fee of one cow.  
He was given the cow and he went away in a hurry.

There where Gor stood looking at the disappearing figure  
And listening to the fading steps of the visitor,  
He considered the kind of treatment he had been given.  
He had never heard of, let alone witnessed, it before.  
So he went back to the anthill and inspected it.  
The tunnel through the anthill so much resembled a tomb  
And the hoe, which had been used to dig it, was there  
On a mound of soil resembling that of freshly dug grave.

Gor cried, in panic  
'That man... that man... he has killed!'  
People gathered around him  
And some warriors were already pursuing the man,  
Ready to feed their spears with his blood.  
But Gor pulled himself together,  
Called the warriors back and said,  
'That man has played me mischief  
But he shall not escape.'

To be sure, the man did not cross the Lake:  
He died on the beach at Mirunda.  
And the cow, listless as a cow,  
Was found grazing on the lush papyrus and leaves,  
Quite oblivious of the voracious crocodiles  
For that beach was infested by the beasts Oyamo had reared.

When the people of Mirunda scrutinized the stranger,  
They discovered he was Oyamo Odidi.

Had Oyamo Odidi still been alive?  
Yes, those who knew said that he had sleepily lived on,  
Eating every vegetation like a goat  
Until one day he chanced upon the right medicine.

People, trees are good:  
No ailment can kill if trees are there  
For they are nature's pharmacy  
Well stocked for any kind of disease.  
If you have trees around your compound,  
You have fenced diseases off your family.

So Oyamo Odidi had awoken from years of sleep,  
Found himself abandoned by his sorcerer family  
Including his wife of flashing tongue and glowing eyes;  
She had gone to another sorcerer,  
With less sleep and words  
But more actions and wealth.  
They had abandoned Oyamo as mentally deficient,  
In the same society with warthogs and hedgehogs.

So when Oyamo Odidi awoke, he bundled his belongings  
Crossed the Lake to where nobody knew him  
And he swore like a failure to avenge his humiliation  
Until he decided on a ruse:  
'Beat Gor Mahia at his game!'  
And he transformed into a tall stooping old man  
Who would pass as Gor Mahia's peer  
Whom he would trust and even compare words with.

Oyamo Odidi knew that though he was as old as Gor,  
His small, stout stature would sell him away,  
So he had to change into some other size and shape.  
And he had vowed that he would leave Gor in the grave  
And then take a ride on a crocodile back to his new abode  
Where people thought he was a harmless stranger.

Gor saw the moon rise, blow into a full ball  
And then begin to erode in its stomach  
Till it resembled a tired, stooping old man.  
He saw the sun rise, tear across the sky powerfully;  
Its strength waned as it drooped into a tired sunset.  
Gor went to bed, tried to rise up again  
But his body was metal too heavy for him to carry.  
So his spirit flew round the land,  
Churned up clouds and started rain.  
Then the women wept and men sung dirges  
And the land turned upside down again  
For the elder who had put the right side up  
Lay motionless in bed.

Kinspeople, the belly of the earth is home to all heroes;  
This earth, kinspeople and friends,  
Shall eventually reclaim you.  
Rich or poor, big or small,  
The earth shall swallow you

What will remain here are memories of what you did.  
The earth swallowed Teful and Ramogi;  
It swallowed Jok the Elder and Onyango the Rebel;  
It swallowed Ologi and Osewe, the two brothers  
Who crossed the Lake and founded Milambo.  
The earth swallowed Ogalo the Crumbs, our unifying elder.  
Ogada and Ong'ondo were gulped down!  
Ae! How large the belly of the earth is!  
How large the mouth of the earth is!

The earth swallowed Gor Mahia's body  
And the good elder sent down torrents of rain  
So that the land may prosper.

A tomb was built on Sigama Hill  
As beautiful and as befits an elder.  
But Gor Mahia's body was not lowered into it;  
The body just disappeared into it!  
So Gor had not forgotten his mischiefs even in death!  
Should the dead bury themselves, Gor?

There, around the tomb, people wailed  
And threatened to enter into it  
To be one with the Great Elder.  
But the wise ones told them that Gor was still existing  
Only he had now changed from a human body into a spirit  
Free to roam the earth and space  
Free to do what man could not do.  
But the people claimed they would never see him as before  
Nor would they talk with him as before  
To extract from him the wit and the word.

They wailed, writhed in mud  
And asked what had gone wrong,  
What they did to be orphaned in the bad times,  
For our land was at the precipice  
Below which were raging waters.  
And only Gor had kept us from falling.

Other peoples had fallen and died  
Because they had no leaders.  
In the white man's reign, there were no leaders;  
Only slave-drivers and lords,  
Prisons for men and whips for us all.

There were no leaders; only the white Lord's worshippers.  
But Gor had been the people's chief,  
Blessed by the ancestors and supported by their progeny.

Weeping until tears were no more is what everybody did.  
Then a dirge was sung with dry lips and plaintive hearts,

*Our elder who snatched us from the claws of defeat  
Our elder who showed love when we only had hate  
Our leader from misery to prosperity  
Why have you deserted us so?  
Would you rather be in company of spirits  
Than of bleeding and sweating wretched bodies?  
Gor greet for us Ogalo, Obunga and Teful  
And tell them that the land they left plentiful  
And for which they offered themselves as sacrifice  
Is turning upside down in their absence.*

## **The Rattles Go Silent**

To the Tornado that settles gently on the prophetess  
And leaves as gently, almost unnoticed,  
I sang and sing and shall sing.  
In the name of Gor Mahia,  
I shall heal with words and medicine  
For his spirit is benevolent  
And his words saving.

People of our land,  
I have seen spirits kill their hosts  
Or with breath of word of mouth  
Charge their hosts to set fire on the land  
And unleash destruction upon poor souls.  
I saw Mikwa Oranga, a head teacher,  
Well learned to incite and to murder.  
Of what use are such people with words?

The spirit of words possessed Mikwa Oranga  
And people gave him an audience as a politician  
To heal them with words.  
Ae! What does the politician do  
If not to destroy what has been,  
To consume what is  
And to block what will be?



I tell you,  
Sowers beware,  
Reapers are here!

Mikwa Oranga formed bands of marauders  
To scorch the earth, to murder the people  
And his words resonated with fury:  
'Burn the earth and kill the enemy!'  
And this destruction was his politics!

The Earth has got her eye  
And her ears too.  
The eagle-eyed Earth saw him  
And cursed him  
Then he wasted away and died.  
Now, where is he?

Yes, I saw Mikwa Oranga killed by a spirit.  
But you Gor left the word that builds;  
The word that builds and heals.

# GLOSSARY

Most of the Luo words in the epic can be understood in their contexts. For instance, the meaning of *dak* can be inferred as ‘a kind of pot’ from the line ‘A giant cannot hurl a *dak* pot at a bird.’ The point to note, however, is that the special meaning may not be conveyed by the inference. The glossary here is included to complement the inference and to define elusive words and names, but there is little hope it will give the special meanings or connotations. Only a diligent research into the African culture in general and the Luo one in particular will fulfil any such hope.

*Abila* room meant for discussions, elder’s hut

*Abola* skirt won by elders

*Agoro* victory songs

*Ae (tho!)* An exclamation; oh!

*Ajuoga* diviner, medicine-man (woman); doctor.

*Andhoga* traitor, hence Odhul Andhoga

*Angere (ngere)* joking game in which one proposes an insulting word or comment to the opponent who then tops it up with another; an unkind joke

**Aora (the Great) River (Nile)**

*Askari* security guard; policeman (woman)

*Ataka* loincloth

*Bogno* prematurely born baby with a pink or white skin, hence a pejorative for the European colonialist.

*Chieno* a skirt for women

*Goche* types of wild cats famous for migratory habits

*Gor ng’at ma tho to neon* Gor’s description, meaning, ‘the one who sees or keeps awake even as he sleeps or is dead’; a nickname for the trickster of the folk tales, the Hare.

**Great Aora River Nile**

*Hasigro* ghee pot

*Jaduong’* Elder; ancestral spirit as in, *Jaduong’, tinende wakeloni diel*, meaning, ‘Elder, today we have brought you a goat.’

*Jodak* (singular, *jadak*) tenant; foreigner

*Jowi* buffalo; big shield made from buffalo skin

*Kang’o* a kind of hardwood tree

*Kanoni* curious; analytical; examining, hence the nickname of Ojwang’

*Kanzu* gown

*Kuon* thick porridge, staple food for the Luos

- Kwiri** poison usually made of snake venom or of poisonous plants
- Ligisa** beaded cap for women, worn by respectable women
- Loo ogik k'Ong'ondo** Literally means, 'The territory ends at Ongondo's', but is the name of the northernmost outpost of Kanyamwa territory.
- Lolwe** Luo name for Lake Victoria, other names include **Nam** or **Nam Ataro**, **Nam Ndiwa**
- Lukwata** fierce, man-eating beasts reputed to have existed in Lake Victoria
- Mahia** miraculous, wonder making, cunning, hence Gor Mahia
- Mbare** beer made from finger millet and reputed to have high alcoholic content
- Nam Ataro** Lake Victoria (see also **Lolwe** )
- Ng'injo** Crumbs, fragments; name given to Ogalo because of his unifying role
- Ng'ou** an expression to show that one will never part with anything; 'I refuse to give you.'
- Nyabondo** Harp made out of sorghum stalk
- Nyakalondo** gourd in which spirits talk, radio
- Nyalhuu** a very poisonous, flying snake that bites heads
- Nyametho** Comet seen once in a lifetime, that is, after 80-100 years
- Nyamwa** abbreviated form of 'Nyar Mwa' or 'Nyar Jomwa' meaning 'daughter of non-Luos' especially the Bantu; the name given to the Kanyamwa people's eponymous ancestress who was of foreign origin.
- Nyange** wooden wheel, usually used in a game of marksmanship
- Nyatiti** Luo harp with eight strings
- Odhi-oduogo** literally 'one who goes and returns,' spirit that continues to play roles in the human world.
- Odidi** the cisticola; a small kind of bird, hence the saying, *Odidi ichamo kar thinne*, meaning, 'The odidi bird is small but can be shared . '
- Odunga** a kind of stick meant for fighting, especially among relatives
- Ogaye** Peacemaker, usually an elderly person who has retired from war
- Ogolo** weed that mimics a crop
- Ohinga** wall usually built for protection; there are many such walls in South Nyanza, the most notable one being Thim Lich Ohinga
- Okoche** Black, British colonial soldiers, mostly Nubian tribesmen from Sudan; a regiment of black soldiers known for their cruelty and gluttony
- Okumu** mysteriously born child, a child seen to have been born as a

result of God's intervention, hence the name  
given to baby Gor.

*Okuro* thorny fruit of some weeds

*Ombugu* type of weed

*Omoro* the Rhone antelope, a rare species now only found in Ruma  
National Park in Kenya

*Osirkal (Sirkal)* The colonial government

*Osumba (Mirwayi)* War general

*Puga-gi-nyaloo* apparatus for smoking marijuana

**Rabala** rebel: one who holds a differing opinion, hence Onyango  
Rabala

**Ragwar** fork, nickname of Chwanya

**Raruoch** giant, hence Ogutu Raruoch

*Riembo* livestock loaning system in which an animal is given out  
until it gives birth to calves which are then  
shared between the loaner and the loanee

*Riwo* anthill kind of anthill used by gazelles for testing the strength of  
their horns

*Ruoth* religious, political leader; chief; king

*Simba* young man's hut

*Tero buru* festival usually confused with *tugo* but actually a latter-day  
version consisting of feasting, songs, dances and  
war simulation

*Thu kiragi!* Formula for cursing

*Tugo* Play; ceremony held a day after a prominent person's death in  
which his life, the life of the community and  
war are enacted

*Widhi* ceiling; ledge

*Wuo'* full forms are *wuon* (father of ) or *wuod* (son of ); a man usually  
names his first son after the father so that *wuo'*  
has the double meaning, for instance, Otuoma  
*wuo'* Matoro means he was both the son and  
father of Matoro.

*Yaye!* An exclamation meaning 'Oh!' or 'Lo!'

*Yoo* Formula for addressing or calling someone loudly, usually  
preceded by a proper name.